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SEPTEMBER 1ST

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A MONTH



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by CARROLL JOHN DALY



DEATH ON DELIVERY

by FREDERICK C. DAVIS

AND OTHERS



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10 DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

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EVERY STORY NEW

Vol. 13 CONTENTS for SEPTEMBER 1st, 1934 No. 4

SMASHING NOVEL-LENGTH CRIME MACHINE THRILLER

Check off on your calendar

- Red Friday**.....Carroll John Daly 10
The 18th—the night the Murder Syndicate set to blast Vee Brown and collect a million-dollar loot stake.

2 COMPLETE MASTER MYSTERY NOVELETTES 2

Sign the receipt for a trunkload of

- Death On Delivery—An Oke Oakley Story**.....Frederick C. Davis 61
Then smash the lock and let murder loose on Hollywood's film colony.

Count the corpse-toll that brought to light the secret of

- The Seventh Cedar**.....Allan Vaughan Elston 102
And showed why six—and only six—sat down to a blood banquet scheduled for seven.

4 GRIPPING DETECTIVE SHORT STORIES 4

See up a couple of smart guys with an

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That'll boomerang and backfire when they try to frame each other in a fancy kill set-up.

Bet your bottom dollar where the

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Rules the track, and doom shadows follow at the heels of each courting greyhound.

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- Suicide Pact**.....Thomas Walsh 119
While, for one short night, death stalks the corridors of a horror hotel.

Play a simple

- Indian Trick**Maxwell Hawkins 131
On a carload of killers who should have known better than to wander out of their own murder precincts.

Here are some

- Gun Angles**.....Editor 140
You DIME DETECTIVE readers have expressed curiosity about—cleared up by authors who know the answers.

- Cover—"Her Body—Crammed Into the Trunk"**.....John Howitt
From "Death on Delivery."

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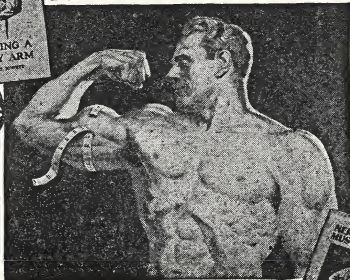


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RED FRIDAY



CHAPTER ONE

Just Call Me Rat

I LIFTED the phone. The voice was low, husky, and evidently disguised. I said: "Yes, Detective Brown is here. Who wants to speak to him?"

"Not a soul wants to speak to him," came over the wire. "You're Dean Condon. Well, give him this message. It's from a friend."

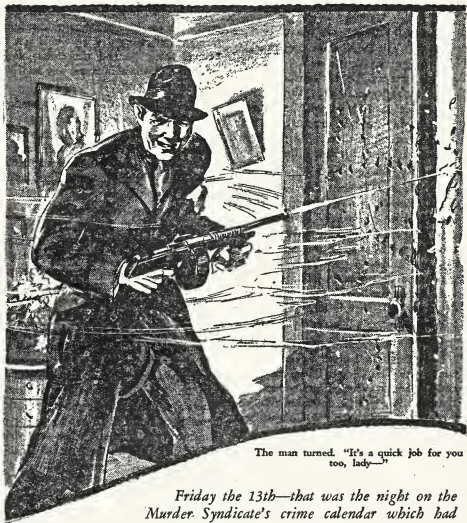
"I can get him right here, and— Who is it?"

"Say, if you want to do the talking, all

A Vee Brown Novel

by Carroll John Daly

Author of "The Murder Syndicate," etc.



The man turned. "It's a quick job for you too, lady—"

Friday the 13th—that was the night on the Murder Syndicate's crime calendar which had been picked for the final blood coup—a coup that was due to net millions for the death master. And that was the night Detective Brown went beserk—for Gertrude la Palatin was scheduled to "go up on the wall," a living picture of the Syndicate's red revenge on the Crime Machine.

right; if you want to listen to some important news about the Murder Syndicate, why—"

"Yes, yes." I fairly shot the words in. "I'm listening."

"Well, button up the mouth then," the voice went on, and somehow I got the impression it was an educated man trying to talk as if he were not. "I've got a tip; spill it to Vee Brown. Gertrude la

Palatin is going to be shot to death just before the evening performance. Did you hear that?"

"Yes, I heard that. By whom?"

"Boy!" The laugh was a harsh cackle. "You've got all the questions, and I've got the answers. By the Murder Syndicate. Just a guy sent by the Murder Syndicate. You want his name? There, there! Don't breathe so hard or you can't hear it. His name is Wallace. Big Boy Wallace. Ah! You've heard it before?"

And I had heard it. It was the man Vee and the police were scouring the city to find. Known to have committed at least three murders; suspected of committing a dozen. Arrested as many times; brought to trial once. But there was no evidence against him then; no witness, at least, who could be produced. The man who was famous for beating the rap for murder. Murder! Therefore he was valuable to the head of this Murder Syndicate.

But Big Boy Wallace had a bad habit; a habit that didn't break out more than once a year. He liked to hit up the liquor and he liked to swagger, and he hated his enemies. So, like all criminals, Wallace made the big mistake. While half seas over he came face to face with a man he had hated for years. And Wallace forgot his surroundings, forgot he was on a crowded thoroughfare—or didn't care. Anyway, he shot the man to death—before many witnesses, seven of whom had already identified his picture.

BIG BOY WALLACE was a wanted man; wanted more than any man in the city. The papers were riding the department, for three innocent bystanders had been shot and one had died. The police wanted Wallace just for murder. But Vee Brown wanted him for more than that. He wanted him because Wallace knew the head of the Murder Syndi-

cate. How? Brown didn't know that. But he knew that the head of the Murder Syndicate had made a mistake. He generally chose his murderers carefully, through others, so that he would not be known. Now he had not chosen carefully, and Wallace in some way had discovered his identity.

Yes, Wallace could name the head of this Murder Syndicate, and Brown was sure that he would. Vee had received his information straight from Gertrude la Palatin, who in turn had received it from the jeweler, Ulrich Rossimire, just before Rossimire was killed.

But the man on the phone was still talking. "Listen!" he went on. "Get every word of this, for Brown. It's some mouthful. I don't want that dame getting knocked off; I've spent too much money going to see her shows. Brown is expected at her dressing room at eight o'clock. The Murder Syndicate is going to drag him off with a fake message. Tell him not to fall for it. Big Boy Wallace will just appear at her dressing-room door; she's expecting Brown and will let him in. Then he shoots her to death! There's a fire escape right outside that dressing room. Tell Brown to anchor on it; watch through the window—and there is Wallace, right in the bag. Mark this, fellow! I'm giving you the tip. Play it any other way, and—*blooey*—like that Vee Brown loses Wallace and loses the girl friend, and maybe loses his life. Remember—tell Brown to play it my way."

"And you won't tell me who you are, so we can reward you?"

The man hesitated a long time, then laughed. "I'm not that dumb. But I'll tell you why I'm blowing the show. I've been sucked in by the Murder Syndicate; this leader has the goods on me. I don't want to do a jolt; and while I ain't soft, I can't go for nailing guys up on walls. Wallace has me jammed up. He'll go for

anything. I'm not a guy who minds hard names as much as I mind hard labor up the river. I'm willing to rat out on this guy. So just call me Rat."

The receiver clicked across the wire. I dropped the phone back in its cradle, dashed to the music room, burst in on Vee Brown.

"It's the Murder Syndicate again!" I cried. "They're going to kill Gertrude la Palatin—Pal." And I gave him the whole conversation as I remembered it.

Brown came to his feet. "It's the break!" he exulted. "The break I've been waiting for. We've got him, Dean—got him at last. It always comes that way. A steal pigeon, a lad that couldn't stand the gruesome murders. A lad—" He stopped, looked at me, rubbed his chin. "Let me have it again, word for word."

Five times, I guess, I went over that conversation. While I was talking, the telegram came. Mortimer Doran wanted to see Brown at eight o'clock, at his house.

"Stupid!" Vee said, then shook his head. "Or is it? Try to get Doran on the phone. No, no"—he stopped me—"we'll go through with it, Dean, but I don't like it."

"Don't like it! Why?"

"I don't know." He shook his head. "Don't you think I've been expecting an attempt on Pal's life? Don't you think I've had the theater guarded for these few performances she's giving? Why, a man couldn't get to her! As for Wallace! He's dumb and hard, but he's a killer. The worst kind of killer. Yet, he'll cover himself, smell the coppers a mile away—and won't come."

"But if he doesn't come, you won't—"

"But he will come." Vee was on his feet. "He will, by God! I'll see to that, if the tip's on the level."

FIVE minutes later we were speeding downtown in a taxi. It was Saturday afternoon, and there was a *matinée*. We didn't drive directly to the theater.

Brown climbed from the cab and we walked around the block. "That will be the fire escape." He pointed up at the rusted iron outside the old playhouse. "Run your eye to it, then straight from it up to the roof across the street. That would be just about in line. A man could lie on that roof with a high-powered rifle and, being any kind of a shot, pop us off nicely."

"It's a trap—for you—for us?" I said.

"I don't know. A silly trap! I'd spot it at once. It's stupid, Dean. That's why I think it's on the level." He nodded thoughtfully. "However, I'll have a couple of good plainclothesmen up on the roof. Come! We'll see Pal and talk it over."

And we did see Pal. Radiantly beautiful, she bounced into the dressing room from a fresh triumph, green eyes blazing lights as she threw her arms about Vee.

"It's the last performance tonight." She dragged the wig from her head and tossed it across the room. "I only took the engagement because of Meyer; he believed in me and started me, you know. Then back to hunting down the killer—the head of this Murder Syndicate. I've got a hunch, Vee. I'm going to play it strong."

"A hunch! I want you out of this, Pal. This foolish idea that you owe something to society for—for your past! You've done enough, and—"

She put both her hands against his cheeks. "Won't you hear the hunch, since it's about Inspector Ramsey—and his being right for once!"

"All right, if it's possible that Ramsey can be right."

"It's his playboy," she said. "The millionaire, Teddy Melrose, who lost all his money. He knew Broadway, knew both

the upper and under part of the city. Racketeers, bankers, race-track touts, dowagers. He's been booked to pay, by the Murder Syndicate—and he can't. I've got a hunch that the head of this Murder Syndicate would like to use a man like that"—and with a smile—"and, perhaps, a girl like me."

"Baloney!" said Brown. "Ramsey used Teddy Melrose once, and he ran like a scared rabbit." Then he told her about the phone call, the plot to kill her.

"But why me? They never asked me for any money; they know better." She extended open, empty hands.

"No. But it shows that the head of this Murder Syndicate is human after all. I spoiled his plans, killed his few trusted men; nearly wrecked his racket, which he hasn't been able to rebuild yet. Now, for revenge, where could he strike me harder than through you?"

Her mouth puckered. "I bet you tell that to all the girls," she said.

BBROWN tried to grin; it was not a success. He put his hands on her shoulders. "I want you to quit the show, not play tonight. Dean and I will lie on the fire escape."

"No, no." She didn't stamp her feet, just set both of them hard down upon the floor and faced Vee. "It wouldn't work. I think—yes, I think you must be in love with me." She laughed. "Wallace would know; those things can't be kept quiet. And if it would work, I wouldn't do it. Quit the show! Quit Meyer on the last night—the big night!"

"It's for a big purpose, Pal—the discovery of the leader of this murder racket. For I can make Wallace talk. It's to save lives—many lives."

Her laugh broke in on him. "You're talking like a child. Of course I'd do it to save lives—many lives. But if I'm here when he comes, there is more chance of saving those lives. No. I'll stay right

here. I'll open the dressing-room door; I'll spring the trap for you."

Vee didn't want to do it.

She rushed on: "You'll be there on the fire escape with a gun. You can watch Wallace's every movement. Why, you have only to step through the window—and there you are!"

Brown rubbed a hand across his mouth. "I guess you're right," he said. "They call me the Crime Machine, and—" He stiffened, drew back from her. "You'll be absolutely in no danger. I'll have him covered from the moment he enters the room."

"Tonight, then, at eight. You'll come from inside or outside?"

"From outside," Vee said. "I'll tip you off from the window, before eight."

She grinned. "With my experience in the underworld we can pull it off." She curled her lip into a sneer, as she used to when she played the part of Myra, the Girl of the Night. "How about the cops? The place fairly reeks with them. He'll never come while they are here."

"I know." Brown thought a moment. "I'll call them off for tonight. I hope to God I'm doing right."

She looked at him a long time. Slim, boyish, they faced each other, shoulder to shoulder. His black eyes were soft now, his thin lips whimsical.

"You're Vivian, now." She nodded emphatically and, as if she liked it. "Just a writer of songs. Vivian—Master of Melody, and I love you for it." Then her mood changed; she smiled grimly. "I hope tonight, though, that you're just Detective Vee Brown—Killer of Men."

Black eyes grew narrow, hard cold points showed. He opened his mouth but didn't speak. He took me by the arm.

When we reached the door, she said: "The revue—my revue! How goes it?"

"Rotten!" Vee said. "Rotten! It doesn't go at all." And suddenly brightening,

"But tonight! After tonight I will be able to write."

CHAPTER TWO

Outside the Window

WHEN we crouched on the fire escape that night Vee Brown said: "I haven't tipped my hand to the police, haven't even said a word to the D. A. I've got boys on that roof, of course, for I don't fancy being shot in the back."

I looked into the room. Gertrude la Palatin sat under a light, smoking. It was getting very close to eight.

Brown spoke again. "Damn it! Dean, I never felt like this before. I'm as nervous as a star on her first night." And more to himself than to me, "I wonder if I'm half in love with the girl."

I smiled but said nothing. Then I tried: "How are you going to work it?"

"I had thought to change my plans," he said. "See that closet. Well, we could have hidden in there. If it was a trap of any kind—I mean, a trap for me—we'd have had the jump on them." He shook his head. "But I decided against that. We can see every bit of the room from here and— By God, Dean, she's a wonder. Look at her sitting there smoking and reading. And I'll lay you ten to one she's actually reading!" This as she turned a page.

"She's a remarkable woman."

"And stubborn as hell. Imagine wanting to run with that Teddy Melrose! Why, the Murder Syndicate wouldn't—" The words died. He moved forward, gently touched the curtains as the rap came on the door.

Gertrude la Palatin came to her feet slowly, laid the book down on the small table. Her movements were easy, assured—but the color had suddenly gone from her face. Her green eyes darted one quick glance at the window. Then she

walked over to the door and opened it.

The man wore a black slouch hat, a long coat, and a muffler high about his neck. But even so, I recognized him. The flat features were those of Big Boy Wallace. Neither of his hands showed; both of them were hidden beneath the long—very long—black topcoat.

The girl played her part well. She fell back slightly, muttered, "Oh!" and then, "I was expecting someone else."

The man said: "Yes, I know. You were expecting Vee Brown, and so am I." There was a queer sort of gurgle in his throat. If it was a laugh, there was not much mirth in it. "He's in the closet; eh, lady? There's a hundred grand and a get-away in this for me. We'll see how your boy friend likes this."

Even as he spoke he threw open his coat. Then things happened with a rapidity that was astounding and left me silent, stunned there on the fire escape, my gun frozen tight in my hand.

Wallace's coat just fell back and both his hands raised. His body swung almost with that single motion and before I even realized that those hands held a gun—a Thompson machine gun—lead was vomiting from its blazing glaring mouth.

I thought of Brown's idea that we hide in the closet, and my stomach completely turned over; for I was looking at that partly open closet door and the multitude of tiny holes that had perforated the wood from top to bottom.

The man turned. Furtive eyes sought the window for one brief moment. He spoke to Pal even as he poked that Tommy gun almost flat against her chest. "It's a quick job for you too, lady, but—"

There was a roar. All hell broke loose in my head. Big Boy Wallace seemed to straighten. My eyes blinked shut and open, but just before Wallace dropped to the floor I saw the blood coming from his ear, knew that Brown's bullet had gone

straight into the man's brain, almost directly through his ear-drum.

We were in the room then. Brown dragged the Tommy gun from twisted, dead fingers.

PAL was rocking back and forth, trying to steady herself, stretching out a hand for a wall that wasn't there. I steadied her and she clung to me. Brown stood looking down at the body sadly.

Pal spoke. "I'm all right. I'm all right. I've seen death before, quick and sudden and—" She was crying as she pushed her tousled head against my chest. "It was terrible when he died. I thought for a moment it would be me, and then those eyes—watching me. Then they were sightless, and he was dead."

"Yes, dead!" Brown said bitterly. "The only man who knew—and he died. If you had only quit the show, let him come alone, let—"

The girl turned. "You're thinking of him then, not of me. You're the finest shot in the world; you've said so yourself." Her voice raised. "Then why not have wounded him, shot him in the—"

"With the gun against your chest!"

And that was all of that. The manager was there, actors and actresses and stage hands, all crowding in the little doorway. Then Meyer and the police. But it was I who took Pal to another dressing room. It was I who tried to comfort her. And her one thought was of Vee Brown.

"He blames me," she sobbed. "He blames me! He can't love me. He—"

"Pal," I stopped her, "Vee's greatest ambition is to get the leader of this Murder Syndicate. He can't work at his music, he can't sleep. And tonight! Well, if it were someone besides you, he might have shot the gun from Wallace's hand. With you, he gave it all up. All the things he had built on the capture of Wallace, alive. All to save you."

"He did. He did!" She gripped my arm tight. "That's true. He did. But he'll hate me for it."

Then her maid; dozens of other people. The police, reporters, cameramen, and the medical examiner. And somehow the explanation, which must have started with Brown, that Wallace came there to kill him, because he was so close on his trail.

Meyer wrung his hands. "There will be no show," he spluttered. "No show tonight. No one out there knows what's happened and—they are hanging to the rafters."

Brown spoke. His lips curled, and I guess only Pal and I got his meaning. "Oh, there'll be a show," he said to Meyer. "Quit on the last night—the big night? Never!" He turned to the door.

Pal came to her feet. Her little body stiffened, her hands clenched at her sides. She moved quickly to the mirror, sat down, dabbed at her face. She was smiling when she turned to Meyer. "Mr. Brown is right," she said. "There will be a show."

After that— What?

Inspector Ramsey of the police. Mortimer Doran, the district attorney. Slaps on the back for Brown; applause—yes, even begrudgingly from Ramsey. The City of New York wanted Big Boy Wallace more than any other public enemy, and it wanted him dead. Vee Brown had delivered him dead. And Vee Brown wanted him living. I could see his face when they praised him, treated him as a hero, snapped his picture. God! How he had wanted Big Boy Wallace, alive.

We saw the show. And the audience didn't know until they left the theater that Big Boy Wallace, ace of murderers, had been shot to death in Gertrude la Palatin's dressing room less than forty-five minutes before the curtain went up. Gertrude la Palatin was superb.

CHAPTER THREE

Death Threat

TWO weeks later Vee Brown was working at his "secret trade" and his "shame" as he so often facetiously called it. There was no doubt that he made more money on a single song than he did in a whole year as a detective assigned to the district attorney's office. Now he was doing the lyrics for an entire revue, in which Gertrude la Palatin was to star.

As for me, I sat in the living room just beyond the closed door of the music room and let my mind wander. My paper lay at my feet; my pipe had long since gone out between my teeth as I listened to the infrequent strumming on the piano.

The Murder Syndicate. Crimeland's latest racket. Simple and direct, it had the police buffaloed, the press brutal in its denunciation of the police. And Vee Brown? I smiled. It had him working on Pal's Revue! There were no two ways about it. Crime, murder, violence, action—all stimulated him to write music, compose those sentimental song hits under the name of Vivian—Master of Melody.

The Murder Syndicate! So simple, so direct; so vicious and sure. And its leader, now free from the possible chance of being caught, was picking his victims with rare shrewdness. First, the simple direct note that they were to pay a certain amount of money. Pay or die—that was the threat. And to make it doubly effective, murdered men were found on the streets of the city. The victims of this ghastly extortion received notes next day that the Syndicate had acted; struck at one who did not pay or who had notified the police.

Many had paid, of course. How many, it was impossible to tell. I shuddered, shook myself, and remembered that it was not so long ago that Inspector Ramsey and myself had sat bound in chairs;

waiting to be nailed, living, to the wall of a house, and left there to die. We had nothing to pay. We were to be just an advertisement. Screaming heads in the papers, that the Murder Syndicate had struck. A warning picture lesson to those who would not pay.

Our deaths hadn't gone through, of course. Those who would have killed us had died by Brown's gun. But the leader, whose identity we did not know, had escaped. And now he was waiting to strike again.

The bell to the upstairs door to our penthouse rang. It was Mortimer Doran. And behind his huge fleshy form was the muscular figure of Inspector Ramsey. They were grim, determined-looking. With them was a third man.

The district attorney, generally an affable man, did not bother to shake hands with me, a courtesy that he seldom neglected. Inspector Ramsey simply grunted, said nothing. I let them in, didn't speak at first, looked toward the music room. I knew that Brown didn't like to be disturbed when he was working. But now no sound came from the music room.

Mortimer Doran jerked a thumb at the third man who followed them in. I knew him of course. It was Teddy Melrose, the former playboy and millionaire, who, like shrewder and brighter men, had lost his fortune. But he had been threatened by the Murder Syndicate—with the hope, I guess, that he could raise the money from his wealthy aunt in Philadelphia. He had been near death with us that terrible night, while we waited to be nailed to the wall of the empty house.

Mortimer Doran chased away all thoughts of my not calling Brown by his next words.

"It's another, Condon. Another threat of death by the Murder Syndicate. Several prospective victims have been good enough citizens and brave enough men to

bring in their letters. I want to see Vee."

I saw them seated, saw that our only servant, Wong, was already mixing drinks. Then I walked quickly to the music room, jerked open the door and closed it behind me.

BBROWN swung quickly from the window. He wasn't angry at the intrusion and broke out before I could speak: "It's gone, Dean. Every bit of it gone. It was pounding in my head, demanding to be thumped out and jotted down. Now—hell! It's the inactivity." He laughed sort of bitterly.

"If that's all that's worrying you, forget it. The Murder Syndicate has struck again."

"Struck! Where? Who?"

Black eyes brightened; his slender figure jerked erect.

"Vee! By God, you act as if you were glad!"

"Glad?" He seemed puzzled, and then, "Well, perhaps I am. But not in the personal sense you mean. Certainly we can't catch the leader of this Murder Syndicate while he remains inactive. He's got to strike, Dean; he's got to strike to be struck. Now what happened?"

"Nothing yet." I shook my head. "That is—not a murder, I think. But enough has happened to bring Mortimer Doran here with a face as long as your own."

"A threat of death, eh?" Brown rubbed his hands together. "That's something; indeed, that's something. It means, Dean, that our Murder Syndicate can no longer collect with simple warnings. It is necessary to act. But come! Ramsey is here with him, of course."

"And Teddy Melrose is here too."

Brown frowned. "He ran out on us last time after all his braggadocio about helping the police."

"Vee," I said, "he's not used to murder and violence. In a way, I am; and after that ordeal—that waiting to be nailed,

alive, to a wall—I'd have run out myself if I were able to run."

"Perhaps you would; and perhaps this Melrose can be of some help." And almost as we reached the door, "He's Ramsey's pet, Ramsey's find. So I suppose I'm against him from the start."

I laughed. "You can't blame him for wanting to stick close to the police."

"No. I can't blame him, Dean, for being frightened. But he doesn't need protection. The Murder Syndicate is purely business. They leave alone those who run with the police. They are out for easy money. But I'll see Mortimer Doran and our good friend, Ramsey."

Mortimer Doran did shake hands with Vee Brown. His placid round face worked through many expressions. Then he said: "It happened again. The Murder Syndicate is to strike tonight. Seven people brought in letters." He extended the missives to Brown. "You don't have to be careful. The fingerprint expert has gone over them."

"And found nothing."

"Found plenty—but it means nothing."

"It seldom does." Brown grinned, opened one letter, then the others; handed each to me. They were all the same. Typed carefully and neatly.

Sir:—

You will have the amount stipulated in previous communications ready to be paid in cash by the next notice.

We respectfully call your attention to the fact that a small delinquent, who has communicated with the police, dies tonight. His death will be rather horrible—and, we hope, effective.

May we call your attention to your morning mail for further details?

Very truly yours,

THE MURDER SYNDICATE.

"Peculiarly worded threat, eh?" Teddy Melrose shot in, his fishlike eyes flashing at us through the film that clouded them.

"Did you get one this time?"

"No. I didn't."

Brown ran through all of them. "We have some good citizens then!"

Ramsey shrugged his shoulders. "But how many got these notes, and are paying—or waiting to see what happens?"

"Well," said Brown, "we have seven letters. Surely the Syndicate will not know that all of the seven men have come to the police! Some one of them will receive a later note, indicating the pay-off."

"Yes, yes!" said Mortimer Doran. "But what of this present threat? Some poor devil, tonight! Must we sit idly by and wait until a man is murdered—horribly murdered?"

"Since we can't prevent crime, let us sit down and wait for it to happen," said Vee Brown. "You've taken every step as I outlined it?" He grinned at Doran.

The district attorney looked at Ramsey. "Everyone is covered?" he asked.

"Everyone." Ramsey's eyes widened. "So the suggestion came from Brown then! Well, I can account for every name on our list—even the ones supplied by the government."

MELROSE raised his eyebrows. "The federal authorities are in this?"

"Certainly!" Ramsey snapped. "The department of justice is peculiar that way. They don't like the United States mails being used for threats of murder, extortion, or even blackmail."

"Will you wait here, Mr. Doran?" Brown asked.

Doran said, as he moved toward the door, "My place is at my office. I just wanted to let you know, and see if you had any suggestion as to whom the victim might be."

"Hardly!" said Brown. And with a smile, "Wait! I'm willing to bet there will be no murder tonight. We've done everything to prevent it."

"Hell!" said Melrose. "If he flunks

out on this, the Syndicate is through—washed up, after the last fiasco. It's a wonder, Brown, he doesn't take a crack at you, attempt your life."

"He did," said Brown. "He did!" And with the curving lips and flippant air that always annoyed me, "And I found it quite amusing. You see, I shot his agent right through the center of the ear."

Ramsey's mouth hung open. He started to speak, then didn't. But he looked over his shoulder as the three men left.

The door had hardly closed when Mortimer Doran returned alone. "That was true about Wallace, then! You think the Murder Syndicate sent him."

"I'm sure of it," said Vee. "Now tell me—why does Ramsey cart Melrose around with him?"

"Well"—Doran stroked his chin, looked to see that the hall door was closed—"Melrose very nearly led him to this murderer before. Between you and me, I think Melrose has received another threat, or learned something."

Vee Brown frowned. "He's a shrewd man," he said. "If he can make a sucker out of Ramsey, well and good." And rubbing his chin, "He may have something up his sleeve. The reward is fairly big."

Doran nodded. "Ludwig Loudon's family"—he was one of the first to be found nailed up—"added a cool twenty-five thousand to it yesterday, and a newspaper jumped it another ten." He rubbed at his forehead. "I wish they'd cut it out. Can't they see it's not a question of money?"

"It's a question of money with Teddy Melrose. He makes no bones about that."

MORTIMER DORAN hesitated, held his hand on the doorknob, finally blurted out: "It's like this, Vee. Teddy Melrose has been seeing a lot of Gertrude la Palatin lately."

"Yes?" Brown's thin eyebrows raised.

"Well—you see, it's rather well known that you and she—" And suddenly clapping a hand down on Vee's shoulder, "She's a fine girl and you're a fine fellow, and—"

"And—" said Vee. Certainly his manner didn't invite further talk on that subject. But that didn't deter Mortimer Doran.

"And women will talk." He paused, then went on hurriedly. "Not that I think she would, or that she hears anything from you to talk about. But I was wondering if Ramsey put Melrose on her."

"And you were thinking," said Brown, "that you'd rather have the head of this Murder Syndicate caught by the D. A.'s office than by Ramsey. Anything else?"

Brown's voice was abrupt. Doran stiffened, then smiled. "Nothing else along that line—except that Teddy Melrose is a very engaging man."

Brown grinned. "Don't you worry about me or your office. Go home and sleep."

"And sleep!" said the D. A. "With some poor devil about to be crucified?"

"I don't think there will be any poor devil murdered like that tonight. The police certainly should be able to prevent it. We don't know the intended victim—that's true. But we should know the hired assassin tonight."

"I hope you're right. God, I hope you're right!" Mortimer Doran said with feeling. "Everything's been done that could be done. Good night!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Murder Syndicate

WHEN Mortimer Doran had gone Brown turned to me. "Teddy Melrose, eh? Pal has picked strange com-

pany. He's become a sort of stool pigeon for Ramsey."

"You know, Pal told you she was going to play him along. She's as hot on this thing as you are, as anxious to get the head of the Murder Syndicate. And Melrose knows his way around. After all, his interest may be in the reward. There's nothing bad about Teddy Melrose. I met him in better days. He's selling investments now, and I understand that considering conditions he's doing well."

"Nothing bad and nothing good about him," Brown agreed. And suddenly, "Pal hasn't been around!"

"Oh, come! Vee," I told him flat. "You saved her life, of course; but you put her in the position of needing that life saved, then practically blamed her for being there."

"I know—I know!" Brown was irritated. "My name and picture in all the papers; the hero of the city! Shot Big Boy Wallace to death while he held a machine gun. I feel like a fool. I don't know why; but I feel that the head of the Murder Syndicate is laughing at me, has made a fool out of me."

"But how?"

"That's it. I don't know how!"

I switched the subject. "About this death tonight . . . What makes you feel it won't—can't happen?"

Brown hesitated, then burst out with: "He's a fiend, Dean, and quite capable of nailing a living man to a wall. But he hasn't acted himself—at least, alone. He's hired others. First it was just by passing along the name of the victim through Rossimire, the jeweler; and the name of the criminal he had picked for the job. Later, perhaps, he made direct contact with his murderers—maybe through Wallace, maybe by phone—certainly keeping himself unknown to them. Here's the point, Dean. There are hundreds, thousands of men in New York

City, who will shoot a man to death for a price, stick a knife in him, toss him from a cliff, beat him to death. But just how many of these criminals would nail a living man to a wall? A man has got to be more than a criminal to do that."

"He's got to be pretty vicious."

"Right! A degenerate, a madman, and the occasional fiend who takes pleasure in inflicting horrible torture. I believe our leader of the Murder Syndicate is such a man, a man with a hate of his fellowmen. Now how is he going to find men to kill like that? Certainly not just by chance. He's got to use professional talent, known criminals." Brown paused. "And such professional fiendishness is rare. Everyone who would do such an act—every professional criminal, I mean, who might be known to the head of this Murder Syndicate—is also known to the police. Wallace was one of them, and he is dead. A glance over the police records located others; prison records found us more.

"So we were able to make up a list of thirty-three known criminals who would not be above crucifying a victim. We ran down that list, have been at it ever since Loudon was found so murdered in his own house. Six of them are dead, eleven in prison, four deported, four in state hospitals for the insane. That leaves eight. Of those eight, three have been located out of the state, and the other five have been shadowed day and night. Oh, I'm not saying the list is complete, but it seems to me that—in hunting out men for his purpose, criminals that are known and who will go to the lengths he demands—this murder fiend will pick one of those men. There you are, Dean! He has thousands to choose from for murder, but he's limited when it comes to nailing living human beings to walls. If he approaches these men, or if any one of these men try to act—why, we will get them tonight."

"And you think this Murder Syndicate leader is one of these remaining five?"

"No," said Brown, "I don't. I think he's a man who has started from scratch. Well known in the underworld, of course, but not suspected as a criminal. A man who suddenly saw the idea, conceived the Murder Racket, and understands the fear and terror created in other victims of his extortion by such horrible murders. I may be wrong, but I don't think so. It takes more than a criminal mind to kill even an enemy like that. So I don't think murder will take place tonight. Even if we don't know the victim, we may know and so have shadowed the prospective murderer."

BROWN had hardly finished when the phone rang. I went across to the table and lifted it. The voice was even, steady, slightly sarcastic and unnatural.

"Is this Vee Brown, the great detective?"

"No," I said. "But—"

The voice said: "This is the Murder Syndicate."

After a silence I stammered: "The— the head of the Murder Syndicate?"

"You may call me that. But I am all of it. The Murder Syndicate! Put that toy detective on if he's there."

Brown was already at the phone, had taken it from my hand, pulled me close to listen. "This is Vee Brown talking." His voice was calm, even quiet.

The voice laughed; it was even a pleasant laugh. "I have called to return your very kind favor."

"My favor?"

"Certainly. You are evidently one of those rare, big-hearted persons who, doing an enemy a good deed, dismisses it from his mind. I mean—about Wallace. Big Boy Wallace. Living, he would have done me a lot of harm. He was too careful for me to kill, so it was kind of you

to do it for me. You see, he knew who I really am."

"So you sent him to me to be killed!"

"Yes." The Murder Syndicate went on easily. "It was rather amusing. I'm quite a gambler. I really didn't know which one of you would die. It hardly mattered, did it? With Wallace dead, he couldn't tell you; with you dead, Wallace wouldn't have you to tell." He chuckled now. "But I liked the way it turned out. I would have had to pay Wallace a rather large sum of money for killing you. As it was, I got Wallace killed for nothing."

"How could you be sure I wouldn't take him alive?"

"The little lady would assure me of that, and Wallace's—shall I say, impetuous nature? You see, I told him you would be in the closet." A moment's pause. "And, do you know, I half suspected you would be there, just fool enough to improve on my plans! I'm sorry I wasn't there to see it. But the papers gave a most vivid account. They made a man out of you, while I made—"

"A sap out of me." It was as if Brown thought aloud.

"Exactly! Now I wish to return the favor, let you know where to find the body. Yes, yes—I know. You've had seven letters from my clients, and you've spent weeks trying to think as I would think. The men, professional criminals, suited for my particular job." And gruffly, "Well, you were right. Most criminals are fools; that's why I work unknown. You made things difficult for me. Have I your attention?"

"Yes," Vee said in a low voice, as if he were afraid the man would hang up. "I'm listening quite carefully."

"Good! But you forgot, Mr. Vee Brown, that there are hundreds, thousands right in the city, who will knock a man on the head for a very few dollars and deliver him at a certain place. Oh, I

abhorred the physical end of it"—a long pause—"but I nailed up my—my advertisement, and he's ready for exhibition—tonight."

Brown's head jarred back, and so did mine. "Who is he? Where is he?"

"He was a hosiery salesman from Illinois, with a wife and three small children. So I picked him."

"Why?"

"Why? Business! The papers will make it a bigger story—more pictures. The wife and children, you know. And my clients will be more impressed. But it is only the beginning. Now, the one big splurge. The Murder Syndicate will strike once more, strike at one of the big names of the city—and so collect a fortune."

"But this man! Where is he?"

"Oh! Staten Island—Midland Beach. A bungalow there. Now don't forget the big date. Friday, the thirteenth. No, no. I'm not superstitious, but many other people are. I like to work upon the imagination of people. Take care of Miss la Palatin. Good night!"

VEE BROWN put down the receiver and looked at me. "I was right," he said. "He made a sap out of me. Got me to eliminate his greatest danger, kill the one man who threatened his existence."

"But you said there wouldn't be any murder tonight, any—"

Brown turned on me. "And I was wrong," he said. "Just dead wrong." And trying to buck up, "But he's come out, Dean; is doing the job himself. There's something in that—something in that."

He was lifting the phone, calling Mortimer Doran. It was scarcely nine o'clock.

I remember the ride downtown, the impatience of Brown on the ferry, his standing there silent in the bow looking up at the pilot house, as if to try to hurry the lumbering craft. But as Wong, our Chinese chauffeur and houseman, drove

out through Stapleton, we talked.

"I was wondering," I said, "how this Murder Syndicate—for he calls himself that—knew so much about the police department, about what you do."

"And I was wondering that, too." He shook his head thoughtfully, said then: "Think of the effect this will have on those who have not paid!"

"If Mortimer Doran can keep it quiet, out of the papers, why—"

Brown shook his head. "I'm afraid our murderer is too good a businessman for that. He'll— But what's this? Not a police escort!"

A motorcycle cop had turned, followed and hailed us. "You're Detective Brown?" he asked. "I've been sent out to direct you."

"Then they found something?"

"They have." The cop nodded in the darkness. "We were called just a few minutes before the district attorney telephoned he was coming over."

"You were called here, on the Island?"

"That's right. A lad from the *Clarion* found the body. Said he got a tip and came over. I think his name was Clancey, or—"

"Cleary!" I said, and Brown agreed.

As we followed the cop down the highway, Brown said: "You see! He tipped off Cleary. Told him the exact location, and Cleary had a look at the body before he notified the police. Yes, the Murder Syndicate will get its full share of publicity. Front-page stuff that no money could buy."

And we were there. We didn't have to follow the cop any longer. The lights of cars, the movement of uniformed men, the ambulance. And by the door of the boarded-up bungalow—for the season was long since past—Inspector Ramsey.

"There's your hunch!" Ramsey jerked a thumb toward the door. "I don't know what the boys who have been shadowing your suspects will have to say, but I gave

orders to get me a full report at once."

"That's right." Brown's voice was dead. "But quite unnecessary. The leader of the Murder Syndicate stepped out himself tonight." Brown paused. "Is it very bad?"

"Bad!" Ramsey swung on him. "I've been on the force for years, never heard tell of anything like it. God! The hospital doctor says he's been nailed there for two days."

"Dead that long?" I looked at Brown.

But it was Ramsey who spoke. "I didn't say 'dead.'" His voice choked. "I said 'nailed there.' He's been dead only a few hours. Rigor mortis just set in."

Brown straightened, stiffened, turned toward the door.

Ramsey grabbed me by the arm.

"It's no grief to me what you do, Condon. But go in that house now, and I'll take my oath you spend the best part of a month wishing you hadn't."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Man on the Wall

RAMSEY was right, exactly right. I did go in, and I did wish that I hadn't. There is nothing to tell, nothing to write of what I saw in that room. Let me simply say that I went out, sat on the single step that led to the rear porch and was violently sick, and without shame.

How Brown stayed in that room I don't know, but he did stay. When he left, he was bending forward reading the words on the note that had been on the man's chest. I had read the big letters, of course—just the words, THE MURDER SYNDICATE.

Cleary, of the *Clarion*, came over and sat down beside me. "I got a tip, Condon," he said. "You know how newspaper work is! And I came right out, found him like that. There was a message under the big printed words. It took

me a hell of a time to write it down; my hand shook like the devil. Listen to this! It gave the lad's name and address and said he was planted there, raving and screaming, Thursday evening at eight-fifteen. God! Forty-eight hours before he died. Listen to the rest of the note!" He produced a small flash and read aloud from some notes he had made.

"This man defied the Murder Syndicate. He did not pay. He went to the police. He is of little importance to anyone but his wife and three children.

"On the thirteenth of the month the Murder Syndicate will strike at another, one of the city's most prominent citizens. He has already sought the police, sought the protection of the district attorney and Detective Vee Brown. This protection will not help him. Remember the date. Friday the thirteenth! One of the city's most prominent men.

"After that date, the same fate; the same death for all those who do not pay. You pay or you die.—The Murder Syndicate." Cleary finished, folded the sheet carefully and put it in his pocket. "Make anything out of it, Condon?"

If he thought to take advantage of my condition or not, I didn't know. I only shook my head. Everything was turning over inside of me.

"Hell!" said Cleary, "this thing will raise a stink to high heaven. It—" He swung, looked around to the front of the cottage. "Here's the D. A.—old Mortimer Doran himself. I'll see if I can get a statement, catch him off his guard just as he comes out." And Cleary left me.

MORTIMER DORAN left his own car and rode back to town with us. He was silent, sunk far back in a corner of the rear seat.

I couldn't stand the silence. Finally I broke it; said: "But, Vee. Why all that

stuff on the note? He never went to the police, was never even threatened. What good does the note do then?"

"We know he didn't come to the police, Dean, but the men the Syndicate demands money from—God knows how many of them—don't know it. They'll think our statement to the papers just an attempt to cover our own inefficiency."

"Our own inefficiency!" Mortimer Doran said. "Perhaps they are right. So the murderer called you on the telephone—called Cleary, of the *Clarion*, too!"

"There was a leak," Brown said. "This Murder Syndicate knew of our sudden interest in a certain type of criminal and was therefore smart enough to avoid contact with any of them. Of course it might be possible to trace the man or men who delivered the victim to the shack, but there're thousands who would do that for a few hundred dollars—not knowing the truth, of course. Tomorrow, when they do learn the truth—well, it's hardly possible that they will be anxious to talk, and impossible that they know who the man was who hired them. But it's the leak that interests me. If we could trace that—"

"Leak? Hell!" Mortimer Doran was jarred into animation. "You're talking like a child. You know as much about police business as I do, and a damn sight more. We must have used a hundred men in looking up those records, trailing men, sending wires all over the country."

Brown nodded, called to Wong to stop the car, leaned out and bought a paper from a boy who was bellowing, "Extra!" He snapped on the dome light. We all looked down at that paper and all remained silent for the space of a full minute, hardly breathing. For there, spread across the whole front page of the *Clarion*, was a picture—a photograph of the frightful thing I had seen two short hours before.

Vee Brown said finally: "So Cleary had a cameraman with him. He telephoned in his story, and the lad rushed back with the plate even before Cleary notified the police."

"The skunk!" said Mortimer Doran.

Brown shook his head. "He's doing his job, just as I'm doing mine and you are doing yours. His is to gather the sensational." And to me, "You see, Dean, the inhuman monster you call mad saw to it that the advertising value of his—his murder, was fully taken advantage of."

"And there's no way to find him." This from Doran as we stopped before his house.

"Only one, I can think of now," Vee answered absently. "Locate a house where this picture"—he tapped the front page of the paper—"is kept and framed, and we'll have our murder monster."

Doran stood at the curb and looked at Vee. "By God!" he said. "You're not trying to be funny?"

Brown shook his head. "No. Any man who could treat another human so, with money the only motive, must have the type of brain that would glory in keeping such a reminder of his act." And suddenly, "They'll ride hell out of us in the papers, but I think the little salesman from Illinois did not die in vain. I think his death will lead to the Murder Syndicate."

"How? When? Can I give that to the papers?"

"I am not sure—how. But I think I know—when. I hope to know positively tomorrow."

Mortimer Doran's voice was not pleasant. "You think you know when! When is that?"

"The end of next week, Mr. Doran. Friday the Thirteenth."

We were gone then, turning across town toward Park Avenue and home.

"Vee," I said, "you're not just guessing—hoping?"

"Both." He looked at me in the darkness. "But I'll know tomorrow. If the Murder Syndicate runs true to form, I'll know."

"What do you mean—true to form?"

"Well"—Brown stroked his chin—"you remember when Ludwig Loudon died. Each of the Murder Syndicate's—shall I call them clients—received a letter the following morning, and the letter announced the name of their victim and what time the body would be discovered."

"I remember." I nodded. "Several brought in their letters. But there's little hope there. The Murder Syndicate was wise enough to mail those letters so they would not be delivered until long after the victim was discovered dead. You don't expect to trace the murderer back through those letters, or letters that people may bring to the police tomorrow!"

"No," said Brown. "But I've got an idea—an idea I don't believe even the Murder Syndicate will think of." He was opening the door of our apartment, stopping, listening, sniffing the air. "We have," he said, "a visitor."

"Who?" I went clumsily for my gun.

"Who has a key? Just—"

"Pal—Gertrude la Palatin." I dashed into the room ahead of him.

SHE was there, stretched out on the couch. She looked at me, smiled, sent a ring of smoke toward the ceiling. It was the tobacco, then, that Vee had smelled. She took my hand, squeezed it, winked at me as Vee entered the room.

If he was glad to see her he didn't show it. He said: "So you're not working with me any more. That it?"

"Not with you, but for you." She sat up now. "If the mountain won't come to Mohammed—Really, Vee, I thought you'd have more nerve and come around."

He stood and looked at her, his face hard, his lips tight, his eyes black, gleam-

ing slits. Then he smiled. "Damn it, Pal! I think I'm jealous."

"Of Teddy Melrose?" She came to her feet. "I love you for that. And—yes—it's not Vivian, the song writer, who's jealous. It's the cold-blooded, killing dick, Vee Brown. I'd have believed."

He grinned then. "I don't like him, Pal. He's a playboy gone broke. Where does he get the money to take you around? Not from his aunt."

"No." She shook her head. "And not from Ramsey—that is, all of it. Believe it or not, Vee, I've been footing most of the bills."

Vee frowned, and when she waited, "Yes? Tell me about it. I didn't think he had come down that far. He's making some money—not a lot, but some."

"He's not a gigolo, if that's what you mean," Pal told him. "He made me a straight business offer. I went out with him first to find out what I could about Ramsey. Melrose isn't a bad sort, Vee. He talks of building up his fortune again. Just needs money to start—one big bank roll. And that roll he hopes will be the reward money for the capture of the head of the Murder Syndicate."

"But Pal, he's useless. He was threatened, got a letter telling him how to pay, and he and Ramsey and Dean went through with it and nearly died. Teddy Melrose broke loose and ran—just as I saved them. He hid like a scared rabbit outside the house; we picked him up later with the car."

Gertrude la Palatin said: "While Teddy Melrose was hiding someone came to the window of that house, and that 'someone' was the leader of the Murder Syndicate. He shot through the window and killed Ulrich Rossimire, just as he was about to tell you the leader's name. Remember that?"

"I'd hardly forget it," said Vee. "So what?"

And Pal threw her bombshell. "Teddy Melrose told you he saw a man running from that window, but he didn't tell you just how near he was to that man or that he saw the man's face."

"God, no!" Brown swung, half shook the girl. His eyes blazed. "No, he didn't tell me that. He recognized the face?"

The girl grinned. "Now aren't you glad you didn't scare me out of this racket?"

"Come Pal!" Vee sat down on the couch. "It isn't the time for nonsense."

"So! I'll tell it from the beginning. Ramsey sicked Teddy Melrose on me. Ramsey more than suspects I was active with you in various cases, and he found out that I was often with Ulrich Rossimire. Teddy Melrose told me that the second time he took me out. He put it very bluntly and very straight. 'I'm sent out after you by Ramsey, and you'd better watch him,' he told me. 'He thinks you've got some kind of a past but isn't sure. Now—I know you've got a past. I mixed around pretty much and knew most of the big shots in the rackets. If Ramsey knew what I know about you, he'd send you back to prison.'"

Brown jarred off the couch. "Teddy Melrose knows—knows you escaped from prison!"

"See, Vee!" I cut in. "You were going to fix that with the D. A., with the governor. Now—"

THE girl said: "He didn't say he knew, and he didn't threaten to send me back to prison. It might have been blackmail, but he made it very much of a business proposition. He thinks he recognized the head of the Murder Syndicate, and of course realizes that he'll have to have evidence. He told me that he was practically broke, suggested that I pay our expenses travelling around the hot spots until he saw the man he thought he recognized, again. Then I was to meet this

man, go around with him, get the evidence—or, at least, find out what I could."

"And you were to split the reward money, I suppose." I put that one in.

Pal laughed. "He wasn't that generous, but he did promise to reimburse me for our little dinners and suppers out of the reward."

"He warned you, of course, against saying anything about this to me."

Pal puckered her lips.

"That's the strange part of it. He didn't. He simply suggested that I say nothing to you until we were ready to strike. Then he wanted me to tell you. He says you don't like him, Vee. But he rather likes you—at least, believes in you—and trusts you enough to take your word that, if the arrest or the killing is yours, the money is his."

"And if you wouldn't agree, he threatened to tell what he knew of your past."

"No—" she shook her head—"he didn't. He just seemed to think me fitted for the job that's to be done. But he made no threats."

"But suggested threats, eh?"

She seemed to think a moment. "I'm not sure that he did. He's cold blooded as hell, Dean—no doubt about that. Wonders if we stall off a while, will the reward be larger! Cynical too; but then—he's set on getting back at the friends who departed with his money! He told me, Vee, that he's suggested investments to people that netted them a fortune, and now they won't even recognize him, just give him a quick nod. It seems almost like an obsession with him."

"Sounds sort of childish," Vee said.

"Yes, it does. But it's understandable."

"What did you agree on—with him?"

"Well—" Pal's lips twisted slightly—"I took him up, paid our way. And—"

"And—?" Vee encouraged.

"And tonight I had dinner with the suspect, the man Teddy Melrose saw run-

ning from the window after Ulrich Rossimire was shot dead at your feet."

I was startled and showed it. Brown was startled, too.

"His name!" Vee gulped. "You know his name?"

"Of course," she said. "Johnny Fitzpatrick."

I DON'T know why I laughed, but I did. Maybe it was because of the incongruity of the name. Hardly one you'd pick for the name for a fiend.

Brown said: "Johnny Fitzpatrick! Well known in the rackets, smartest and most dangerous of all the ex-bootleggers."

"Was he on your list?" I asked.

"No, no. He wasn't. And the last man I'd think of putting there. He cashed in with Repeal, and I understood was living on pre-Repeal profits. But he never—. It seems incredible."

Pal said: "That's what I told Teddy Melrose after I met the man. He's rather nice, rather quiet. A little gray around the temples—and seems glad to be out of it all."

"And what did Melrose say?"

"Melrose said there had to be a first time for everything. That a few years ago it would seem impossible to him to be sitting there, letting me pay for his food and wine."

"And he's right." Brown finally nodded. "Yes, there's got to be a first time for everything. You'll have to cut it, Pal; you're in great danger. If Teddy Melrose has found the right man—." And I knew Vee was thinking of the message of the Murder Syndicate that had come over the phone—. *Take care of Miss la Palatin.*

"I can't quit it." Green eyes flashed.

"You're afraid of Melrose—that he'll talk about your past. That's why you can't quit?"

"I don't think so," she said. "I think it's something stronger than that. It's the

past itself, Vee. I keep telling myself that it's over and done with, but it isn't. It's there after the years. There are times when I want to open my window and yell it for all the world to hear. 'I'm a crook. I've been in jail. I'm a sham and a—' No, no. It's as if I'd been seeking freedom, and now feel that I'm finding it." She clenched her hands. "I know what happened tonight." She pointed toward the radio. "It came in over the air. I'm going through with it. I've got to go through with it! I've got to know he's caught, or dead. Then I'll be free!"

She turned, fled toward the hall and the door, swung back. "I wanted to tell you, wanted you to know, if—if anything happens to me."

Brown let her go without making a move to stop her. He simply took the *Clarion* from his pocket and looked long and steadily at the picture.

"She has to do it, Dean," he said after a while. "In a way she's like me. The thing's gripping her, tearing inside her body. Something she can't get rid of. I've killed men—many men. Now—. By God, Dean! I'd die willingly tomorrow—tonight—if first I could have that monster lying at my feet and pump lead into his stomach."

I said, without thinking, without meaning anything: "Why in the stomach?"

He said, simply enough: "Because it hurts more in the stomach."

CHAPTER SIX

The Letter

THE next morning Brown was up early. We had a visitor. He was an excited, nervous little man who had inherited money and lived out on Long Island. His name was J. Seymour Brentwood, and he looked every letter of the name. He was talking when I came into the room.

"I hope the thing's not a joke, Mr.

Brown. I hope one of the neighbors wouldn't perpetrate such a joke. Yet—I came to you because—well, I didn't want my name tossed about in the press. My wife's a Stevens, you know. The Massachusetts Stevens. Her family wouldn't like it a bit."

"Did you show it to your wife—anyone?"

"No, I didn't." Though the room was not warm the man rubbed great beads of perspiration from his head. "It's a ghastly joke, though. I had just read my paper when the note came."

Brown had passed the note to me and I was reading it.

Dear Mr. Brentwood:—

You have already read in your morning paper of the unfortunate and horrible death of James Francis Stacey, in the shack on Staten Island. If you will examine the post mark on this envelope you will note that the letter was received in the United States post office several hours before the dead body was found.

You have been selected by THE MURDER SYNDICATE to pay the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars in cash or meet the same unpleasant fate. Therefore it is necessary for you to get together that amount in bills of small denominations before noon on Saturday, the Fourteenth of the present month. On that date you will receive in the first mail full instructions as to how to turn this money over to the Murder Syndicate.

The papers no doubt have also informed you that on the night of Friday the Thirteenth a very prominent citizen will die. On the morning of the Fourteenth you will receive a letter telling you who this man is, and the post mark of this letter will convince you that the dead man was alive and well the very moment that letter to you was received by the United States post office.

He has appealed to the police. But we have planned his death, and nothing can save him. If, after this man dies and you read the letter, you are not convinced that our demands must be met, we can give you but one more demonstration. That is—to nail your own living body to a wall.

THE MURDER SYNDICATE.

"You see the point, don't you, Dean? Just as I said."

"But why doesn't the Murder Syndicate mail the letters sooner if they want to convince their victims the police can't protect the man?"

"Good old stupid Dean." Vee ignored our agitated visitor. "The thing is simple. If we knew the victim we could very easily protect him. Only the Murder Syndicate knows the victim until after the crime has been committed. He has laid his plans, picked his victim, and is sure enough to name him in a letter before he is killed, or even taken by him. Partly conceit, Dean, but mostly good business. It is rather horrifying for those threatened to know that when that letter was written the victim was alive and well. Also it impresses them with the Murder Syndicate's inevitability. He did the same thing at the time of Ludwig Loudon's death."

BBROWN turned to the nervous little man. "It's not a joke, Mr. Brentwood—far from it," he said seriously. He crossed the room and laid both his hands on the man's shoulders. "You are fortunate in coming to me. I can save your life and I can save your money. You must not tell what was in this letter to anyone—not anyone." Vee folded the letter and put it in his pocket. "If you obey that simple instruction I promise you you will be quite safe."

"But they say—the letter says he—this man went to the police and—." He pointed at Brown's pocket. "If you notice the envelope that contained the letter; it's slightly blurred, but the post mark is six-thirty. I put a magnifying glass on it."

"You see, Dean," Vee half threw at me. "The very fact that this Murder Syndicate can convince his victims that his letter was written some hours before the body was found strikes them with a

sort of awe, a terror. And of course they believe that the murdered man is not only known to the police but has sought police protection. Even such a stout-hearted citizen as Mr. Brentwood feels the influence."

"I—well," Brentwood stammered, "I felt it a duty to come. I'm not afraid, Mr. Brown—hardly that." His laugh was shrill and false. "But my wife, you know. Her family—the Stevens. Good God! To be nailed to a wall like that. Can't the police—can't you—"

"Stop it? Certainly." Brown nodded. "You are in an enviable position, Mr. Brentwood. Upon your actions from now on, until the night of the Thirteenth, rests the life of a man; perhaps the lives and happiness of many men—but at least the life of the one mentioned in this letter."

"Yes, yes. But I don't quite understand." Bent shoulders straightened slightly. If he didn't get Brown's words he got the tone of his voice—one of respect, admiration—and he liked it.

"And that's even nobler," said Brown. "Doing this for the good of your city and not fully understanding it! Your promise? You will do nothing? Act as you always acted?"

"Well—yes." He took Brown's hand.

"Good! Dean, take Mr. Brentwood out the back entrance, through the court, and see him safely in a cab."

I got Brentwood as far as the door when he turned, jerked his arm free, made a couple of false starts and finally got the words out. "I—I want to do what I can, Mr. Brown. But I must think of my wife. I—I might draw the money from the bank. It will look like good faith."

"That, Mr. Brentwood, is your own business. I shall treat your visit confidentially as you requested when you came in. But, if you do as I say, act your normal self and don't go around talking, there will be no Murder Syndicate to pay

the money to on the morning of Saturday the Fourteenth."

When I got back to the apartment Vee Brown was rubbing his hands, humming softly. "You'll have to go back downstairs again, Dean. To let in Mr. Wiley. You don't know him, eh? A broker. I've done business with him. You see, he's about Brentwood's build, age, general appearance. There's just a chance that the apartment is watched and Brentwood was spotted coming in."

"And you want this Wiley to come in the back and go out the front, as Brentwood?"

"Not exactly. I want him to go out the front, as Wiley. If he's shadowed, they'll know he's a broker who has done business with me before."

I GUESS it was a full half hour later that Wiley had come and gone. After seeing him out the front entrance I returned to Brown with the information that a man had slipped around the corner and followed Wiley in a taxi.

"Good!" said Vee, and as Wong came through with his bag, "Take it to the Newark airport, Wong. Yes, Dean, that's right. I'm making a flying trip to Washington—a secret one, too." The upstairs hall-door bell rang. "Go out the side entrance, Wong, after the gentlemen are in." And to me when Wong had gone and Vee was starting for the door, "That will be Mortimer Doran and, I daresay, Ramsey—who is afraid I may have found out something he missed." And rubbing his hands, "Which I have, Dean. . . ."

Brown was right. Ramsey was with the D. A., and also Teddy Melrose, to whom Vee was especially cordial. "I'm glad you came, Mr. Melrose. I want to have a word with you in private, after Mr. Doran and Inspector Ramsey leave."

Teddy Melrose's eyebrows went up; fish eyes stared. "Yes?" he said.

Mortimer Doran did most of the talking. "We've had visitors downtown. Inspector Ramsey was kind enough to call me in."

Brown let me read the letters Mortimer Doran held out. There were nine of them. They were all the same, word-for-word copies of Brentwood's letter. Only the amounts differed.

"I thought there would be more than that," Doran said. "I thought the Murder Syndicate, with this threat about the Thirteenth, was going into it wholesale."

"Maybe he has," Ramsey cut in. "Maybe other men who got the same notes are scared stiff. Take these men here!" Ramsey tapped the letters. "All of them well fixed, and the amounts well within their means. It may be like that with many others, and they intend to pay or just to sit tight and see what happens on the Thirteenth." And with a half sneer, "Mr. Doran tells me you've got things sewed up, Brown, so nothing will happen on the Thirteenth."

"Perhaps I have."

"You were to let Mr. Doran know for certain today, I understood."

"That's right."

"You had any callers? Anyone with a letter come straight to you?"

"Hardly." Brown smiled. "But I'd like to interview the men who came to see you."

"I've got a list of their names." Ramsey gave it to Vee. "Everything open and above board. Now—what's your dope, eh?"

"I am expecting a tip. Indeed, I've had the tip, but I'm expecting something else later in the day." And turning to Doran, "I'm sorry you spoke of this. In a way, I meant it to be confidential."

"Well," Doran said—and, "Well," again. "I had to say something."

"That's right." Melrose spoke for the second time. "They've given you quite

a send-off, Mr. Brown. *Detective Vee Brown, Killer of Big Boy Wallace, to Arrest Head of Murder Syndicate on the Thirteenth.* Something like that. Early afternoon editions."

Brown looked at Doran.

Doran shuffled his feet, looked toward the ceiling. Then he suddenly blustered: "Yes, I gave it out. What the hell could I do? The place was lousy with reporters. I had to say something. And, damn it, Brown! I've given you your way in this case, let you run things to suit yourself. Now—you've got to make good!"

"Or you'll take it out of my hide Friday the Thirteenth. Well I don't blame you. So—."

"So—what?" Ramsey's face shot forward.

"Why, I'll have to drag in the leader of the Murder Syndicate, of course."

"You're going out and get him?"

"Not exactly," said Vee, and that twisted little smile was in one corner of his mouth. "I won't go out and get him. I'll sit down and let him come to me."

INSPECTOR RAMSEY didn't like it, But Teddy Melrose stayed behind after they left. The door was hardly closed when Vee came back into the living room and stood facing Melrose. "Melrose," he said, "what's the racket?"

Melrose smiled down at the diminutive detective. "That's all right," he said. "Miss la Palatin said she spoke to you." "And did you approve?"

Broad shoulders shrugged. "Not exactly. I thought it was premature, disclosing my suggestion."

"Suggestion!" echoed Brown. And then, "You mean 'threat.'"

"I mean exactly what I said—suggestion."

"You are in a position to send Miss la Palatin to prison. You know that."

Melrose stiffened. "I am quite aware of that."

"Then," said Brown, "be quite aware of this. I am very fond of Miss la Palatin." A moment's pause. "Maybe more than just fond of her. I want to impress you, Melrose. You blackmail Miss la Palatin, open your mouth about her past—and I'll get you."

"You'd kill me, eh?" His eyes widened. "By God! I believe you would."

"Believe it! A blackmailer should—"

Teddy Melrose's right hand swung quickly. It was a hard blow, but not particularly well timed. Brown was always quick, but now he only moved his head. The fist whizzed by harmlessly.

Melrose grunted, jarred back. He had not seen—neither had I—the gun that was there now in Vee's hand, planted hard into his stomach.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Melrose," said Brown, "but nature has not gifted me with great physical strength. I wouldn't try another blow."

Melrose grinned—actually grinned. And it wasn't a bad grin. "Put up the gun," he said. "I lost my head." And when the gun disappeared with a single quick motion, "There! I can talk better. I'm not a blackmailer and didn't like the word. But I see your point. Miss la Palatin can withdraw from our little understanding any time she wishes, and need have no fear that I'll ever talk. To me, it was simply business."

"What do you want out of it?"

"I want money. The crimes have been of a ghastly nature. I am shocked and horrified, like anyone else. But I'm not a fool. I want only one thing out of it." He leaned forward now. "I want money—all I can get—all the traffic will bear. I want money! There you are. If you don't want Miss la Palatin in it, get her out of it—come in yourself."

"What about Ramsey?"

"What about him?" Melrose fairly flung the words at Brown. "He thinks

he's using me and will drop me when the break comes, if I don't drop him first."

"Does Ramsey know you saw this man?"

"He knows that I saw a man, and he knows that I *think* I recognized that man. I'm stalling Ramsey along." He smiled. "I'm ostensibly trying to stir up my memory, looking for the face I saw."

BBROWN nodded. "So that's it. That's why he didn't want me to see you alone."

"I'm not accountable to Ramsey," Melrose sort of stiffened. "Nor to any man. But if you want to work with me, I'm willing. It seemed to me that through Miss la Palatin—who would finally convince you I was right—and then through you, was the best way to work it. I saw the man. I know who he is. It's up to you to trap him or get a confession out of him. I can't do that."

"It's Fitzpatrick, eh? That seems unbelievable."

"Maybe it does," said Melrose. "But that's the man I saw fire the shot through the window that killed Ulrich Rossimire. Take it or leave it. You can have all the glory as long as I get the money." And after a bit, when Brown did not answer at once, "Call Miss la Palatin off if you want. I'm not a blackmailer. I'll never make trouble for her."

Brown shook his head. "You don't know that girl," he said. "She'll never quit, never lay down on the job."

"Well," Melrose said, "are you with me?" His eyes narrowed. "Remember, Miss la Palatin gave her word that I'll get the money—all of it."

Brown extended his hand, looked straight at Melrose. "I misjudged you, I guess. Yes, you have my word. You get the money—all of it."

Melrose held the hand a moment, finally

dropped it. "How will you work it? Have him watched?"

"No, not exactly. We mustn't make him suspicious. We'll give him plenty of rope until next Friday night."

"Watch him then when he goes to—" Melrose's shudder was quite visible. "I tell you, Brown, there are times when I'm scared."

"You don't need to be. You're too close to the police. The Murder Syndicate knows that. It would be sheer bravado to strike at you."

Melrose twisted up his face. "Bravado or not, it wouldn't do me much good if I were dead—like that, on a wall."

There was more talk. Brown saying he would work it out, and Melrose continually coming back to the question of money. And when he spoke of money, he spoke of those who had robbed him.

When he was gone Brown said: "You saw it too. It's not just greed, Dean. The man wants desperately to regain his lost place in the world. And this passion of his to start over, to strut the city again, may help us a lot. If he went to Ramsey, Ramsey, with the papers at his heels, would make the arrest and try to beat the truth out of Fitzpatrick."

"You don't think it is Fitzpatrick?"

"I've got an open mind." Brown stroked his chin. "You see, it's quite possible that the leader of this Murder Syndicate was not at the house that night and did not fire the shot through the window. Fitzpatrick might have done that, yet not be the leader—and not even know who the leader is."

"You don't think Fitzpatrick capable of—"

"How can we tell what a man is capable of? I don't know what I'm capable of myself. Look at it this way, Dean. This leader is a shrewd man, and he knows that Gertrude la Palatin is very close to me. The moment he met her,

wouldn't he suspect that I suspected him? Granted that Fitzpatrick is this man, would he believe it a mere coincidence that they met? Would he have dinner with her, or—"

"He'd kill her!" I cried out suddenly.

"Would he?" Brown shook his head. "Would he kill her when it was known she'd been with him? Wouldn't that give to me the very proof I seek? No, he wouldn't kill her, Dean. But if he isn't this leader, then Pal may learn something. For, if Melrose told the truth—then Fitzpatrick was paid by the Murder Syndicate to commit murder. I'm off to Washington. I'm worried about her, of course, but that's not good logic. Reason tells me she's safe, safer than she's ever been." And he was gone.

REASON didn't tell me the same thing that it told Brown; it didn't tell me anything at all. Things were so utterly jumbled.

And that's how things stood, if they did stand at all, when Brown called me up from Washington and said he'd have to wait over until Monday, as the man he wanted to see was out of the Capitol for the weekend. It was Monday night when he came back and Tuesday night Pal had dinner with us in the apartment. There was nothing new to tell about Fitzpatrick.

"On the level, Vee," she told him seriously, "I don't know if he's onto me or not. But he does seem to enjoy me." And when Vee frowned, "I don't mean just my company. It's as if he were laughing inside at something." She leaned forward then. "I have a date with him for dinner and the theater on Thursday. He told me he couldn't possibly see me Friday—he had a very important engagement."

"He had!" I popped that out.

"How did he look when he said it?"

Brown's voice was quiet but his black eyes flashed.

"He was smiling. Just smiling and nodding at me, almost as if it were confidential."

Brown got up and paced the room. "If he's in this thing, the man's a fool to act like that, to say what he did." And after a pause, "Fitzpatrick never was a fool."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Monster Strikes

AN atmosphere of tenseness and horror hung over the entire city. At least it seemed that way to me. I know I didn't sleep much, and when I did I'd wake up with a start, bathed in perspiration with a picture in my mind that only long pacing of the room and numerous cigarettes would erase.

The papers kept the thing on the front pages. If the Murder Syndicate wanted advertising they certainly got it. Such a threat, such a menace had never hung over the city before. There were numerous pictures of James Francis Stacey, his wife and children.

And Vee Brown. I had trouble getting him even to make a semblance of acting on the case. But I did persuade him to go and interview personally every man who had come to the police with a letter.

"It's a waste of time, Dean," he argued. "But you're right. I've got to do it. It would seem strange to the head of this Murder Syndicate if I didn't, and make him suspect that I had a visitor of my own."

"But what can your visitor do to help that the others can't?"

"A lot, Dean. A whole lot. Somehow this monster knows who goes to the police, and who doesn't. He lays off those who do. And I don't want him to lay off our little friend, J. Seymour Brentwood."

That was early in the week, and Brown

had not told me why he went to Washington, nor could I think out the reason.

Pal called us up every night and twice during the day. She promised Brown that. She was still going with Fitzpatrick and was now thoroughly convinced that he was not only not the head of the Murder Syndicate, but had nothing to do with it.

Thursday night, and the papers still carried the story—the distress of the widow—the loss of an adoring husband and worshipping father.

"As a matter of fact," Brown told me, "Stacey was neither a good husband nor a good father. He neglected his family. They were half clothed and half fed. He made a good salary but he spent plenty when he came on to the city. He liked to run around. That's the reason he wasn't missed. It was nothing for him to disappear from his hotel for days at a time. I daresay some dame picked him up, delivered him over to the boys who finally brought him to Staten Island. He leaned forward suddenly. 'Do you know what I did in Washington?'"

"No!" I said eagerly. And then, "If you're going to tell me, go ahead; if you're just going to talk around things, why—"

"I'm going to tell you, Dean. I went to see the post-office authorities; the big gun. Do you know what I wanted, Dean?" And when I didn't, "Let's go back to the death of Ludwig Loudon. He was killed well after midnight. The next morning several prospective clients of the Murder Syndicate received letters saying that Loudon would die, and those letters were postmarked early in the evening, before his death. With Stacey it was different. The letters were not only posted long after he was taken, but four to six hours before he was found. With the next victim the Murder Syndicate has promised to send its letter while the man is alive and free. You see the point?"

I confessed that I didn't.

VEE stroked his chin. "Well, if I could have one of those letters in my hand, naming the prominent man to be murdered, while the victim is still free, I could prevent his murder. Not only prevent the murder, but catch the Murder Syndicate right in the commission of his crime."

"But how, Vee?" I was puzzled. "The letters are never delivered until the next morning. The victims of the extortion don't get them until long after the man is dead—and found."

"No, they don't—but Uncle Sam does. They are in the United States post office. That's what I went to Washington about. I want just one of those letters naming this prominent man—before he is taken and killed."

"But how—"

"Brentwood—J. Seymour Brentwood. I want that letter as soon as it is received in the post office. See, Dean. If I have the name of the next prominent victim to be nailed up and have it before the crime takes place, I don't have to go out and find the monster who runs this Murder Syndicate. I can wait until he comes to me, wait with the prominent victim."

He grinned crookedly.

"Can—the postal authorities do it?"

"That's what I asked myself." Brown nodded. "But let me tell you. I talked to a big man—his name would surprise you. He listened, lifted his phone, talked to several people. Finally he turned to me. He said, 'You'll have your letter, Mr. Brown. You'll have it five minutes after it is received at any post office.' No 'ifs' and 'buts', Dean. A straight statement."

"But if the victim is already taken—"

"According to Brentwood's letter, he would be alive and well. And they couldn't have taken him now. Don't forget this is to be a prominent man. If he were missing any length of time, the family would be worried; his business associates

and the police would be notified. It's not a sure thing. But I think the Murder Syndicate will run true to form this time. It's their big knock-over. The pay-off!"

"You have told Mortimer Doran?"

"No one; no one but you. We won't have any leak this time."

"But the government might—"

Vee grinned. "That's one thing about the federal government—they don't have leaks. I was assured of that, but I didn't need to be. You see, Dean, they were as much interested in this case as I am." He frowned. "That's the one thing I didn't like, didn't like at all. It's really a one-man job." And with a nod when I would have cut in, "A two-man job, for I'll want you, of course. I'm no good without an audience, Dean. But they insisted on having an operator with me. There was nothing to do about that. I've met him and you wouldn't ask for a better man.

BBROWN glanced at the clock. "Almost one," he said, "and we haven't heard from Pal. I—" And the phone rang. "There she is! No coincidences, eh?"

He lifted the phone, and I saw his face change. He said, "Yes," then "Yes," again in a low voice. I leaned forward, listened. It was the same rough voice, disguised, very unnatural—the head of the Murder Syndicate.

"So there you have the picture, Mr. Brown. The little lady has disappeared. But don't worry about her yet. Really, I haven't time to bother with her now—but I will, after tomorrow night. I'm afraid you didn't exercise any too good judgment as to her company. Melrose, you know, was not overcareful about his friends. He may have introduced her to a most undesirable acquaintance."

"Is she alive—now?" Brown's voice was hollow.

"Oh yes, quite alive. Disturbed, per-

haps, mentally, for she must guess what her curiosity and—association with you has brought her. But indeed alive. I'm not simply going to kill her. It will be interesting. I have never experimented with women. I wonder if they take it as well—or should I say, as badly—as men. . . . What did you say?" And when Brown did not answer, "Yes, I am going to nail her up, conscious and shrieking, for you to find. You killed my men, spoiled my plans, almost ruined everything—including my reputation for protecting those who aid me. Now, you've brought me out into the open, made me work alone. If that's what you want—how do you like it? I'll make you a promise—yes, a promise. You will be the first to see her body, nailed there like the others."

Brown didn't speak. I guess he couldn't.

"And, by the way! Don't have a police-hunt. If you do, I will know and act at once. She'll go up first."

"You intend to go through with the other tomorrow night?" A voice spoke close to my ear; I knew it was Vee's for I saw his lips move. But it didn't sound like his voice, not a bit like it.

"Have I ever disappointed my clients? You lost me thousands of dollars, Mr. Brown. This time I will get millions. First, our prominent man; then, our famous actress. I'm a little ashamed of myself, Mr. Brown. I pride myself on being a businessman. Yet, this woman—But we all have our weakness. A bit childish, eh? Just hate of you, perhaps. Though I set myself up as a syndicate, I'm afraid I am human after all."

And Brown broke loose. "Human?" He cursed and threatened. "Just a beast!"

There was a false sort of laugh over the wire. "And I thought you were a cool, calculating killer! You know—I hardly believed it, with such conceit as yours—but I think you're in love with the girl."

And suddenly, "If you make one move out of your house, one move on the public street, I'll put her up at once."

There was the click of the receiver and Vee dropped into a chair.

He was on his feet almost at once, though calling Pal's apartment, speaking to the maid. Then he turned to me. "She's not there. He's got her." This as if he hadn't really believed it.

He took the drink I gave him, gulped it quickly, reached for the second, then hurled it into the fireplace. "It's something that can't be drowned, Dean. I need the stimulant, but I need a clear head more. I was a fool. I should have dragged her away, locked her up, put a guard over her. I—" And then suddenly turning toward the door, grabbing up his coat, "You can come with me if you want."

It was no use to argue with him, though I did remind him of the man's threat if he moved out of the house.

"That's because he's afraid I might learn something. He's—Are you coming?"

WHAT a night! One spot after another, as fast as a taxi could take us. Brown had just one thing in mind. He was looking for Johnny Fitzpatrick.

He was like a man in a daze but he didn't make his search pointed. Just in and out of places.

Every once in a while he telephoned Pal's apartment. The last time he came from the booth frowning. "She rang up, Dean. The maid was sure it was Pal, herself. She told the girl not to worry about her, that she'd be away for a day or so. By God, someone must have held a gun to her head!"

"But why have her telephone at all?"

"The Murder Syndicate didn't want a police-hunt started, I guess. And it wasn't the maid's calling the police that he feared, but someone from outside calling

Pal and the maid saying she didn't know where she was. Or—or—" He grabbed my arm, looked wildly at me. "Funny, Dean—I'm hunting the city tonight, with a single purpose—to find Fitzpatrick and shoot him to death. Yet I can't understand it, for I don't believe he did it."

And perhaps a half hour later, when we left one of the hot spots, "You've let me act like a fool, Dean. I shouldn't be out like this tonight. I—I—Damn it! We'll go and see Irving Small. He knows everything."

We had been to see Small before. "He knows nothing about this Murder Syndicate," I said. I didn't say a word to Brown about his tirade that I should have kept him home. I knew how he felt and wouldn't argue that with him.

It was close to four o'clock when we got Irving Small out of bed. Small was the smartest fence in the city, knew more about criminals than any other man and sold his information to Vee Brown. Brown held over his head a twenty-year stretch—which he conveniently forgot so long as Small was useful—and also paid, generously, for what he wanted.

Now he backed the little man into a corner, stared straight into his eyes. "Irving," he said, "I'll give you ten thousand dollars for the name and whereabouts of the head of the Murder Syndicate."

Irving Small spread his hands far apart. "I'd tell you if I could, Mr. Brown; you know that. Most any of the boys would turn him up for a thin dime. He's not of the city, not of the rackets. It's a one-man show." And when Brown just stared at him, "I know how he works, but it's through different people. He knows the big crooks, approaches them over the phone or through others. They don't know who they're working for until—well, like that last one, the lad found on Staten Island. He uses many aliases.

No one would work for him knowing—”

“Small, this is known only to Dean and myself. Miss la Palatin has been snatched by the Murder Syndicate.”

“Miss la Palatin! Mr. Brown, she—By God! Then I know who did it.”

IRVING SMALL crossed the room, locked the door, went over and peered at the windows; not out them, peculiarly—at them.

“You know!” Brown was eager. He was after the little old man, shaking him.

“Maybe I don’t *know*, but I might guess. For God’s sake, Mr. Brown! You won’t do anything until you’re sure?”

Vee set his lips tightly. “I won’t do anything that will get you in trouble.”

Irving Small’s head bobbed up and down. “There’s a man on the Avenue. A crook that was a gentleman—a racketeer with a word he wouldn’t break—one of the straightest crooks the city has ever seen. He’s been away for a while—saved up and quit with Repeal. Well, he’s back. And he’s been talking, hinting that the Murder Syndicate had a great racket, and those who wouldn’t pay deserved what they got. I didn’t believe it at first, he’d been such a straight shooter, but it came to me pretty straight. Then I heard that he was taking Miss la Palatin around.”

“Yes.” Brown’s face turned milky white. “His name!”

“You knew him. You’d hardly believe it. He must have lost his money. He’s—he’s—”

“His name! His name!” Brown shot the words out, though he must have known what that name would be.

“His name,” said Irving Small, “is Johnny Fitzpatrick.”

I said to Brown: “You believe it now?”

“Yes, yes.” Vee turned toward the door. “I must believe it now.”

Irving Small followed him. “If you see

Fitzpatrick you won’t—won’t tell him I told you!”

Vee Brown straightened; his lips were a long thin gash, his black eyes burning coals. “You don’t need to worry about Fitzpatrick,” he said slowly. “When I see him I’ll shoot him to death.”

We left the little pawnshops by the side door and went directly back to our apartment.

I went to bed but I didn’t sleep. Twice I went down the hall and listened at Brown’s door. He was pacing back and forth; back and forth.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Red Friday

THE next day Vee tried to talk up his own spirits. “Just a few hours, Dean, and I’ll have him, force out of him where Pal is being kept. You heard him say he wouldn’t harm her, wouldn’t hurt her until he was through with this prominent man.” He rubbed his hands together, put those black eyes on me—worried, flickering eyes that for the first time didn’t seem capable of a direct look. And then, after he had built himself up to almost a certainty of Pal’s safety, “By God, Dean! Maybe I should start a police drive, have every cop in the city looking for Johnny Fitzpatrick.”

“You said yourself, Vee, they’d kill her then. They’d have to, to protect themselves.”

“But he couldn’t—not the head of the Murder Syndicate. He’s too busy today—must be. And—and—” He sat down in a chair, put his head in his hands. “Fitzpatrick—the others who hold her for him. They’d shoot her to death, strangle her, maybe just chloroform her. Don’t you see, Dean? Don’t you understand? I don’t want her to die—like Stacey.”

I walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

He jumped to his feet, said: "No word yet from the postal authorities, nothing about the letter."

"There couldn't be, Vee. It's scarcely noon."

"God!" He thumped a hand to his head. "I'll get them, Dean. The Murder Syndicate, Fitzpatrick, anyone who had the least hand in it. I'll devote my life to it. I'll kill each one of them slowly, horribly—" He turned on me. "I'm talking like a maniac and you let me rave. Am I the Crime Machine that all crooks fear? Well—he doesn't fear me. He takes Pal and laughs at me."

"He does fear you, Vee. Can't you see that? That's why he took Pal—to throw you, make you useless when you're most needed. Yes," I said when he just stared at me. "You'll lose your head, and Pal will pay for it."

"Stop!" He jumped to his feet, glared at me. When he spoke again his voice was very calm. "You're right, of course, Dean. Dead right! You'll have nothing further to complain about—nor the people I serve—nor Pal."

He turned and left me, going straight to the gunroom. The sound-proof doors closed, but I knew that he was working the thing out of him. That each dull crack of his gun sent a mental bullet into the body of the Murder Syndicate.

We never left the apartment. Vee had dinner with me. He didn't talk, didn't need to. His face was hard and cold, his lips tight, his eyes burning balls far back in his head. I didn't talk either.

AFTER dinner Brown went out on the terrace and stood looking over the city. It was raw, mean, a misty rain in the air. I brought him out his coat. He didn't speak, just nodded his head as he threw it over his shoulders.

The phone rang as I went in. It might be the call Brown was expecting, hoping for. I lifted the receiver—and froze. The

voice was the same. It was the head of the Murder Syndicate.

He spoke quickly. "Vee Brown! You disobeyed orders and went out. Gertrude la Palatin is dead. They say lightning never strikes twice in the same place. Run out to Staten Island then. Good-bye!"

The phone clicked. I looked at the clock. It was exactly fourteen minutes after eight. Should I tell Vee? Should I—And I looked at something else. At the figure that stood in the open French doors, the coat half around his shoulders, his hair matted down on his forehead, his black eyes blazing.

"Well, who was it? The postal—" And moving forward, "It was the Murder Syndicate."

"He said—" I started, then couldn't give him the message.

"Yes?" His voice was very low.

"The same thing, Vee. Threats. That you couldn't stop him from making good tonight and—"

"And Pal—Pal!" His eyes were feverishly bright—points of heated steel in the center. "She's dead? She's—He's done it, Dean!"

"She's dead," I said. Then I told him, gave him the message. I had to.

There was no excitement after that. He seemed very calm. "The government has failed me. The Murder Syndicate has beaten me. I'll have to go out to Staten Island. There's a chance, just a possible chance that—My God! She may still be living. I'll get the police out there and—"

Wong said, as he followed a strange man into the room, "Brought him through servants' entrance, as you make suggestion, Mr. Vee. This—he is the right one?" And from the position of Wong's right hand beneath his white coat I knew it would go rather badly with the stranger if he were not.

"I've got the—the document." The man hesitated, looked at me.

"You'll have to go it alone." Brown spoke quickly, far back in his throat. "You can talk to Dean here, and—yes, let me see it." This, as Wong left. Brown took the already opened letter from the man's hand.

The government man was surprised. "You're not going with me! I thought you wanted to— What's the matter?"

"She's alive, Dean!" Vee cried out as he thrust the letter into my hand. "You were right. He's afraid of me, wanted me out of things for tonight, far out—on Staten Island. Here! Let me read it again—all of it." He snatched the letter.

Later I got a look at it. It was much the same as the others. A rather long explanation of how Brentwood must pay the twenty-five thousand, which I didn't read then and don't consider of much importance now. But the thing that got me and got Brown was the last of it, brutally facetious.

There is to be an added attraction to tonight's little performance. Besides Allison Brackenbridge we are also adding the famous actress, Gertrude la Palatin, to our list. The usual courtesies shown the gentler sex will be missing on this occasion. She will meet death directly after the body of Allison Brackenbridge is found.

Miss la Palatin has been under the personal protection of Detective Vee Brown. The same Vee Brown who announced through the papers that he would take me tonight, Friday, the Thirteenth. Miss la Palatin will be nailed up—a living picture of this detective's conceit—and in retaliation for his former attack on me.

VEE BROWN, a different man now—alert, eager, anxious—was speaking. His words jumped out. "Miss la Palatin's life depends on our action tonight." He turned to the stranger. "We are fortunate, Halley, that in this letter the Murder Syndicate does not name the place where the body is to be found. You know this Brackenbridge, Dean?"

"Only that he's vice-president of the

Third National Bank and Trust Company, that he has money and—I think—was divorced and married again."

The government man, Halley, said to Vee: "I've got orders that it's your show, Mr. Brown. But I put a smart man on this Brackenbridge. He'll get information—at least, all that's necessary. I'll just use this phone."

He did and it was surprising the information his man had obtained in that short time. Halley read it from the telephone notes he had made.

"Age, fifty-two. This is his second wife. Divorced the first—over a woman—not the one he married. Has two children by his first wife—both married. One child by—" He seemed to skip down the pad. "I got his address, of course. And he's partial to women. That's well known, I understand. He's been blackmailed once or twice—or, at least, shaken down. But, outside of that—clubman, extremely wealthy, dignified and important. The man the big boys have to see when they want to borrow money from the bank."

"Everything but who he voted for at the last election."

"I could get that too, I guess." Halley grinned. "Now what?"

"Since we don't know where he's to be killed, or how he's to be lured there, we'd better go straight to his house and size him up, see if he's got the guts to play ball."

"Let's get going!" Halley agreed.

"Just one thing more." Vee clutched his arm. "This is more than plain business with me, Halley." He tapped the letter. "Miss la Palatin! This murderer has her prisoner. It may be hard to force him to tell us where she is. I want the opportunity to do that before the police come."

Halley ran a hand through his hair, looked down at Brown. "It's irregular, of course. But if I were searching the place for clues I couldn't be expected to watch you, nor the man either."

Both men looked at each other—black eyes and gray ones locked. They didn't speak. After a half minute, perhaps, their hands met.

WE went out into the drizzle, and to the house of Allison Brackenbridge.

"We'll make it, Dean," Brown told me over and over. "Our murderer always runs true to form."

As we mounted the stone steps Brown said: "Now to frighten ten years from a man's life!" He slid quickly into the vestibule and waited for the door to open.

The butler was a stiff, oversized piece of wax work. He raised his eyebrows as if he had seen it done that way in the movies when the three of us pushed our way into the hall. Then he spoke far down in his chest. "Mr. Brackenbridge is out." And to Vee Brown, who had said that Brackenbridge was expecting us, "He certainly must have entirely forgotten the appointment. He's out every Friday night. Club, you know. Practically his only recreation from business."

"What club?" Brown demanded.

"I'm sure I wouldn't know that. And if I did know it I couldn't take the liberty to—"

"Who is at home?"

"None of the family. At this time of the year they spend their weekends at—"

"Damn their week-ends!" And catching himself up, "It's extremely important that we get in touch with Mr. Brackenbridge—important to him."

The butler hesitated a long time, looked us over, finally said: "His secretary, Mr. Collins, happens to be here. I'll tell him, if you'll give me your names."

Halley stepped forward but Brown motioned him back, shook his head. "Never mind the names. Get Mr. Collins—at once."

The butler nodded, turned slowly about, and with measured tread crossed the hall

to a door at the rear and at the extreme right.

"Come on!" Brown motioned to us to follow, and to Halley, "He doesn't look as if he'd talk, but I don't want him to know we're the law."

Mr. Collins stood behind a long flat desk with a multitude of papers before him. He was very tall and very thin and his shoulders bent forward. His age was perhaps forty.

Brown said without preliminaries: "How long have you been with Mr. Brackenbridge?"

"Eleven years. I—" The man leaned over the desk, his eyebrows raised somewhat like the butler's. "Your question, sir, might be considered an impertinence and—"

"Hell!" said Brown. "Where's Brackenbridge?" He snapped out a badge, pointed at Halley. "He's a secret-service man. Ever hear of the Murder Syndicate?"

"Yes. Why—certainly. Yes, I have."

"Then don't monkey around. We've come here to save Mr. Brackenbridge's life. He's the next victim—tonight's victim. Now where is he?"

THE man's face turned a sort of greenish yellow, his arms seemed to fold up on the desk. He just slid, rather than fell into the chair. "No. Not Mr. Brackenbridge! It couldn't be."

"Where is he?" Brown demanded.

"He's at his club. I can—can get hold of him there on the phone and tell him." Collins reached for the phone. Brown never took his eyes off the man; his hand shot out, shoyed Collins back. "Give me the name of the club. I'll get him."

"It's not exactly a club. It's—it's—"

"It's a dame, eh?" Brown nodded, and to Halley, "Of course that's it. The Murder Syndicate discovered he visited a woman. From what the butler said, it's

every Friday night. Or maybe, this time, for the weekend."

Collins' tongue came out, ran over his lips. He sputtered: "The scandal! Why not let me telephone him and warn him?" And suddenly, "My God, gentlemen, this is terrible! I don't know what to do, what to say. He's— Just a young lady he has grown interested in, as if she were his own daughter. His own children being married, and—"

"Her name! Her address! Is he there now?" Brown slammed out the words.

"Miss Claire Vagne." Collins gave us an address further uptown. "You think this devil knew about the—the young lady? Why it's ghastly. Mr. Brackenbridge will be there alone with her, alone in that big house."

"No servants?"

"No." Collins was excited now and didn't choose his words. He forgot that Mr. Brackenbridge's interest was simply fatherly. "No servants on Friday nights. Mr. Brackenbridge had an unpleasant experience before. He's a careful man."

Now Brown was questioning the thoroughly frightened secretary. What type of man was Brackenbridge? Would he play along with them? Would he help set the trap that would catch the Murder Syndicate?

"Good God!" Collins gasped. "Have Mr. Brackenbridge stay there and wait for the murderer to come! Preposterous. The scandal of the thing!"

"You think he'd rather be nailed to a wall, eh?"

"No, no." Collins began to run hands through his hair, sort of dance up and down. "I must call him. He mustn't stay there another minute. I don't see how the house was discovered. I—"

I said: "It's a private house, Vee. We might get in, hide somewhere and—"

"No, no." He shook his head. "That wouldn't do. It depends too much on

luck. The stage has to be set. Brackenbridge has to be the featured player."

HALLEY said slowly: "We know where he is and know it's a love nest. We can walk in, catch them together, and give Brackenbridge his choice of playing along with the law or facing a scandal."

"And the woman?"

"Women can be handled, too."

"Gentlemen—gentlemen!" The secretary was ready to blow up. "Mr. Brackenbridge is a big man, a powerful man; has influence. You can't take liberties with him as you would with—"

Halley jerked a thumb at the secretary, Collins. "What about this bird? He'll buzz Brackenbridge as soon as we leave."

Brown lifted the phone, called a number. I heard him talking to Finn, a big rough ex-cop who now served on the D. A.'s staff.

"That's right," he was finishing. "You know Dean Condon. He'll meet you right up from the corner with this party. . . . No, you're not to do a thing to this man—just ride him around. . . . Yes, you can take him out to the roadhouses—anything at all. But don't let him get near a phone. . . . Sure! You can spend a century." Brown looked at Collins. "You'll need it. He doesn't look like a heavy spender."

We had a little trouble, of course. "You can't do this" and "You can't do that" from Collins. Then he heard Brown's name.

He fairly gasped. "Not the detective who shot all those men, and—and Big Boy Wallace!"

"That's right." Brown twisted his mouth slightly. "So you make a squawk on the way out, and I'll put a bullet or two in your back." His voice sounded very serious, almost solemn, yet he winked at Halley when Collins turned. We left without even the butler being aware of our departure.

We had walked down the block and Brown had hailed a cab before Collins found his voice. Then, "I assure you, Mr. Brown, I won't mention a word of this to anyone, won't even telephone Mr. Brackenbridge. So you see there's no need—really no need at all—of treating me like a common felon."

"It's for your own good." Brown slapped him on the back as he pushed him into the cab. "Look at the story you can tell him if Brackenbridge asks why you didn't phone!" And to me, "All right, Dean. You deliver him safely to Finn. Halley and I can't spare the time."

"But I want to— I must be there."

"And you will. You know the address. Wait around the corner down the block; I'll come for you."

And we were off.

No need to go into Collins' conversation or my anxiety to get him off my hands. We met Finn, a huge giant of a man, whose capacity certainly was not all muscular.

"So you and me are going to make a night of it, eh?" Finn took Collins' arm as he led him to another car. "It won't cost us a cent, so we'll drink only the best."

"But I never—that is, seldom touch anything."

"Oh, no!" I heard Finn say just before I returned to my own cab. "But you will, tonight, Mr. Collins. You will tonight."

CHAPTER NINE

Behind the Curtains

WHEN I reached the corner uptown I dismissed the car and waited. Five, ten minutes passed; nearly fifteen. Had things gone wrong; had things broken without me? But it was early yet, very early for— And I jumped. Brown had crossed from the other side of the street and tapped me on the shoulder.

"We make our entrance from the street behind," he told me. "Really no need for it, Dean, for I'm sure the house isn't watched—that is, unless this Murder Syndicate has hired a place across the street and watches from the window. Still, we'll stick to that rear entrance."

He led me down the street and around the corner, still talking.

"And there's no need for him to have the house watched. It's just a natural for our murder master. He's discovered Brackenbridge's little—or rather, large love nest—for the house is a four-story one. There is no one there but the squeaky-voiced blonde and our eminent banker. It's a set-up, a one-man job. By God, Dean, he could murder both of them and take his time about it. I don't think he even thought the secretary was on." His shoulders moved as he looked up at a house and we ducked quickly into an alley.

"We can't afford to be seen by the people in the house behind and have the police on us," Brown said as we sought a particularly dark corner and, climbing the fence, dropped to the stone yard of the place we sought.

"Vee," I asked him, "what did Brackenbridge say? He—the girl! They let you in? Was he willing to help the police by waiting and—"

"Not so fast, Dean. In the first place, we weren't let in. We came by a cellar window." He chuckled slightly. He had been feeling and acting himself once more, ever since the letter with the news Pal was alive. "We entered at a most embarrassing moment for Mr. Brackenbridge. A most compromising situation, to put it mildly. Damn it, Dean, he thought we were detectives looking for divorce evidence and tried to buy us off. He was almost relieved when he found we only wanted to prevent his murder."

"Would he help?"

"He will." I could see Brown's head nod as we reached the back door. "When he got thinking and recalling what he had heard about this killer he agreed. His enthusiasm was not great, I'll admit. But you can have a look at him yourself. I've set the stage."

Brown locked the back door carefully behind him. We passed through the kitchen, pantry, dining room, and so to the living room—and Allison Brackenbridge.

He was a banker. He couldn't have been more of a banker if he had been made up to play the part. Cold steady eyes, an extra chin, slightly bald, and skin as pink and white as a baby's. And the blond doll! She was just that—a blond doll. She kept powdering her face, fixing her lips and muttering: "My God—my God! This is terrible."

But she cast furtive, questioning, speculative blue eyes at the banker. She was wondering—was this the end of the sugar? Should she make a scene, blame him, put on an act? But she wasn't sure, wasn't going to make any mistake, and kept to the safety of, "My God—my God! This is terrible."

HALLEY said: "Mr. Brackenbridge is beginning to weaken. I hope he doesn't mess things up."

"For his own sake I hope he doesn't." Brown was very grave. "Certainly they'd spread his name all over the papers. He'll have to stick it out anyway, and if he won't play our game, then—" And turning to the banker, "You know the papers, Mr. Brackenbridge. *Murder Monster Trapped in Banker's Love Nest*. Allison Brackenbridge—"

"Stop it. Stop it!" Brackenbridge toyed with the thick black ribbon that dropped down from his glasses. "How will my actions prevent such a scandal?"

"For one thing," said Brown, "I'm

willing to go to bat for you. You received threats from the Murder Syndicate."

"But I never got so much as a line, had no idea of such a thing."

"I know. But this is your story now. You didn't wish to alarm your family so said nothing to them, but came straight to me. You have been acting under my advice ever since. You say Collins rented this place. Very well, the papers can't do much about that. You've already used the phone and tried to get Collins; the butler knows that. It was rather important. Then Collins called you at your club; at least, you thought it was Collins. He had to see you at once, he seemed excited. You came here to his house. You've met him here before—things to do with the bank—times you must not be disturbed. And there you are! A gun in your back—and"—with a wave of his hand toward Halley and myself—"the rescue squad."

"But it doesn't sound convincing. The papers—"

"Collins is not important to the papers, and the papers won't take a chance on a libel suit."

"Yes?" the girl cut in. "What about me—my reputation?"

"You," said Brown, "will leave immediately after the—the end of the Murder Syndicate. You won't be questioned, won't even be in it. I'll see to that."

"And after that—what?" She half jerked her head toward the banker.

"After that"—Brown smiled at her—"I imagine a penthouse over on Park Avenue. I'm sure it's more sensible—and safer. There is no reason why things should change between you and Mr. Brackenbridge. Of course he'll be rather pleased and thankful that you're helping, too; helping him as well as the police. I daresay his reward will be more than generous. He was saying what a little wonder you are."

"Oh, Ally!" The girl walked over,

curled an arm around the banker's neck. "You didn't mean—not the ring I looked at—not the one from Cartier's! Of course I'll do it for you."

"Yes, yes." Allison Brackenbridge stretched up his hand and patted the back of hers, as if he were tapping a desk at a board meeting. "I was thinking something like that. I— But the house should be surrounded by police; the man could be arrested before he even got up the steps."

"We went over all that." Brown shook his head. "We want to be certain. Besides, with the place surrounded—so many men, men who might talk to the papers about you and Miss Vaugne! But I brought in Mr. Condon. Best shot in the city."

Maybe I reddened, I don't know. Brown always kidded me about my shooting. But Allison Brackenbridge came to his feet and shook hands with me.

"So, that's settled." Brown seemed very confident, very sure. "We'll go through it again, then take our places. We can't tell when or how he'll come." And a stage director getting ready to shoot his picture was never more particular than Vee.

The stage was set.

THE girl and the banker were to stay alone in the large living room, both window shades tightly drawn. There was a small door that led to the main hall, folding doors with huge heavy drapes that led to the dining room. These doors were open but the curtains tightly drawn. Then there was another set of folding doors that gave onto the front room that overlooked the street. These also sported two heavy curtains which Brown drew tightly.

"There we are!" Brown explained the whole situation and seemed satisfied. "If the trap was a natural for this murderer,

our trap for him is a natural, too. I don't know how he'll come, but I've locked the door of the front room which leads to the hall, so he won't disturb us. That's right, Dean—we three will be hiding behind the curtains in the front room. That makes Mr. Brackenbridge perfectly safe."

"But suppose," Mr. Brackenbridge interrupted, "he should not come alone. What then?"

"He's got to come alone. Now, Mr. Brackenbridge, you and Miss Vaugne must spend your evening as you would ordinarily spend it. Since I'd like you at the table, with your back to the curtains, so that the man must face us—perhaps you might be doing a little writing. Miss Vaugne will sit there by the dining-room curtains and read, under the lamp."

Halley said: "Don't you think a little conversation might be better?"

Brown hesitated, shook his head. "No. The Murder Syndicate won't know how long they've been just like that. He can't look in the window. You see, he may come right to the front door and ring the bell; he may enter by the cellar window, as we did. He may even have been here before and had a key made. Yes—I know. Light conversation would be better, Halley—much more natural, perhaps. But it's too much to ask of them. If our man listened and heard, he'd find the unnatural, strained, theatrical note in it and be suspicious. No, I don't think either one of them could put that over." Brown took one more look about the room. Brackenbridge sat behind the flat desk. Miss Vaugne dropped rather awkwardly into the chair beneath the lamp and opened a book.

"All right!" Vee nodded. "Now we'll leave you and watch from behind the curtains."

I looked down at my watch. It was exactly twenty minutes of ten when we pushed the curtains aside and stepped be-

hind them. I saw both Halley and Vee reach for their guns, and I saw Brown grin as I clumsily pulled mine from my pocket.

Halley took up a position right in the center, where the curtains parted. Brown hesitated, raised a hand as if to tap Halley on the shoulder, then changing his mind went to the end nearer the door that led to the hall. He motioned to me to take the other end.

So we were set. Three men. Two of them steady, cool, used to danger and meeting that danger quickly and with the assurance of long experience. The third man! I grinned to myself. Well, I'd been with Brown and certainly I was used to danger, even if I couldn't meet it with much assurance.

THROUGH the corner of that curtain I peered into the room. Stiff and straight, Allison Brackenbridge sat behind the desk. Over his shoulder was the mantelpiece. On it was a modern electric clock.

Occasionally the girl moved the book in her lap, crossed her legs, kicked one leg against the curtains leading to the dining room. Once when that curtain swayed from her moving foot she jarred up with a start, put her hand to her mouth, sat so—on the edge of the chair—then with a queer little giggle fell back in the chair.

Brackenbridge didn't speak either. He bent over the paper before him, making queer designs on it, I think. But his eyes were ever raising, gluing themselves upon the curtains, as if he would stare right through their thickness and assure himself that we were still there.

Several times I straightened; I'd get sort of stiff. Ten o'clock came. Ten minutes after ten. I was staring into that room—just staring and thinking. They were not pleasant thoughts. I shuddered. We were waiting for a killer again—a

monster of murder. The picture was vivid in my head. Staten Island—the man on the wall! And—

I jarred back. My gun nearly went off. The voice sounded like a gigantic roar in the utter stillness of my own horrible thoughts. Allison Brackenbridge had suddenly burst out with: "Listen, Mr. Brown. Suppose he starts shooting. I—"

"He won't!" Brown snapped out from behind the curtains. "Be a man, Brackenbridge." And for the first time I noticed the pallor of the banker's face.

"It's my family, not myself, I'm thinking of. If anything should happen to me, you know. Then the bank! They depend on me for most—"

"Silence!" Brown snapped. And as Brackenbridge opened his mouth as if to speak again, "Or scandal."

Brackenbridge's lips went tight. He glared at the curtains a moment. Then a worried look took the place of the glare. He smiled and nodded. It was as if he suddenly realized that his life depended on Brown, on us behind the curtains.

The silence again! The girl with the book, the pages of which she never turned; Brackenbridge's scratching scrawl upon the paper—and the single distant chime of a clock. That must be in the hall, I thought.

Halley was still bent in the same position, looking between the curtains. Brown was crouched low, squatted on his haunches, half sitting on his heels.

I went back to my thoughts again. Twice I jerked up my head with a start. Things had seemed to get so far away. Brackenbridge seemed blurred, indistinct, like three men sitting there. I rubbed my hand across my eyes, smothered a yawn, and bent forward gluing my eyes to the tiny slit.

I looked at the girl and the curtains beside her, the curtains that led to the dining room. The curtains moved, swayed

as they had swayed before, swayed as they had swayed when the girl had crossed her legs, swayed—I stiffened—froze. The girl had not moved, had not crossed her legs. And—and—God in heaven! I had to hold my breath to keep from crying out. The curtains were parting. A figure—a figure that made no sound—that gave no warning—was coming into the room. The Murder Syndicate was there in the house with us. There in the room.

CHAPTER TEN

The Man in the Mask

TALL, broad, all in black. Black hat, a long black mask covering his face as he stepped between those curtains.

The girl raised her eyes, leaped to her feet, opened her mouth—and the man's hand went up and down. There was a thud—blood on her forehead. I saw the red plainly before she sank to the floor.

I raised my gun, shoved the end of it close to the crack, then felt a hand touch my arm. I nearly screamed, but I didn't. It was Halley. He had squeezed my arm in warning, I guess.

The Murder Syndicate was there! I saw the gun in his right hand, a folded length of heavy cloth in his left—cloth that was the shape and bulk of a tool kit from a motor car.

The masked figure moved quickly, so quickly that Brackenbridge had not turned his head before the man had crossed the room and stood beside the desk, half facing us, half facing Brackenbridge, who had swung around. The banker's breath just whistled in his throat. Both his hands grasped the arms of his chair.

"Allison Brackenbridge." The man spoke slowly, distinctly, and certainly ominously. "You, who once refused me

money, will be the example that will make many men pay me—pay me when they see you nailed like a bat to the wall of this room."

A long pause—and that voice that seemed to ring with disaster. "Allison Brackenbridge, I am the Murder Syndicate. I have come for you."

The monster's left hand came up above the flat desk, jerked forward in a sharp sudden motion that was arrested in mid-air. I saw the bag in the left hand unwind, stretch out. I heard the rattle of metal upon the desk. Then I saw what was there. A great quantity of huge, spike-like nails and a hammer lay on the desk before the bulging eyes of Allison Brackenbridge.

The banker's head twisted as if unseen hands moved it. His eyes lowered and he saw the woman unconscious upon the floor. His head swung slowly back and he faced the masked man. Then he looked on the desk again and I think for the first time realized what the nails and the hammer meant, for he just screamed out the words.

"Brown! For God's sake! Brown. You—Brown!" He half rose in his chair and pointed straight at the curtains where we crouched.

The masked figure moved his gun slightly in his right hand and fired. One shot or two. I wasn't sure then. It seemed like a single shot, yet too loud for just one.

Halley, beside me, jarred back, swayed, raised his hands and gripped at the curtains. But just before he fell to the floor, dragging the curtains with him, I knew that two shots had been fired and that Brown had shot the murder monster right in the stomach.

Chaos after that? No, I don't think so. I saw the masked man raise his left hand, stagger slightly and clutch at his stomach. Then the falling curtains were

upon my shoulders, across my arm, over my gun. But I could see, and what I saw didn't help me any.

The murderer raised his right hand. Glassy, blinking balls glared at me through slits in the mask. He was—he was— God! He was going to kill me.

Another shot came. Orange blue flashed to my right; burnt powder was in my nostrils. The murderer jerked back; his right arm went into the air, his gun exploded. A bullet tore into the ceiling, and now he clutched at his stomach with both hands as he staggered wildly, blindly about the room.

HALLEY lay on the floor. I could see the back of his head, his right hand stretched out, his gun still gripped in it. And I saw Brown; the curtains hadn't caught him. He was too quick, too clever for that. Now he was in the living room, talking to the staggering figure.

"You don't like it, eh? Don't like it in the stomach. Well—I didn't think you would. Where's Gertrude la Palatin?"

The staggering figure turned, faced Vee, bent his head forward, peered straight at Brown but didn't seem to see him.

"Where's Gertrude la Palatin?" Brown asked again. His voice was harder now, colder—merciless. The voice of a killer.

The masked figure whirled in a circle, to come back facing Vee again. He cried out: "You'll never see her. She's dead. Yes, she's dead. I had a premonition to-night, and telephoned Johnny Fitzpatrick to kill her. Ah!"

He jerked up his right hand—fired. And Brown shot him in the center of his chest. I knew that, for the man clawed at his chest now, tore at the vest, the shirt beneath it, screamed horribly as he crashed back against the wall.

He didn't fall at once. He stood there trying to push himself erect as his knees

gave. But he couldn't make it. He sank to his knees, toppled forward, hung so a moment and rolled over on his back.

And all the time Halley and the girl lay on the floor and Brackenbridge sat in the chair. He hadn't fainted, for his eyes were open, just staring, a glaring blankness in them.

The murder monster groaned, and once he screamed in agony: "God! It hurts—it hurts. I—I— Kill me. Kill me!" He raised his gun as Brown crossed the room.

"Look out, Vee!" I cried, but I didn't need to. The man couldn't see Brown now, or if he could, he didn't want to—didn't care. He was twisting his gun toward his own head.

Brown kicked the gun from his hand, sent it across the room, said: "Where's Gertrude la Palatin?"

"She's dead. I told you she's dead." And from pleading to be killed, he suddenly cursed. "Johnny Fitzpatrick killed her—killed her—cut her throat. I sent him word. I'm glad she's dead. I—why don't you kill me?"

"I'm not going to kill you," Brown said. "Men die slowly from bullets in the stomach—very slowly and very horribly. Where's Fitzpatrick?"

Brown was standing directly over the other now, looking down at the agonized eyes, visible through the slits in the mask. "Mr. Crucifer of Men," Vee spoke again, and his voice shook slightly, "where's Johnny Fitzpatrick?"

"Find him!"

Brown said very slowly: "All right. Here's another. Right in the stomach! Right—" His gun moved slightly, directly above that grovelling thing.

"Vee. God! You can't." I grabbed at his arm.

And he struck me. He turned quickly, jerked up his gun and caught me flush on the chin with it. I staggered back; things

blurred. My knees began to give. But I stayed upon my feet. Someone had me by the arms; we staggered against the wall together. It was Halley.

JUST then the man on the floor spoke. "Johnny Fitzpatrick killed her and he's waiting for me at"—I didn't hear the address but I did hear the apartment number—"Four-D."

Halley said: "His bullet creased me, I guess, and knocked me cold." He ran a hand across his head. "I see Brown got him—and the girl is sitting up. What the hell happened to you? Were you hit?"

"No, no. Nothing. I— Things just whirled on me."

"Sure!" said the government man. "I know how you feel." He walked over and looked at the man on the floor. He was still conscious, still moaning. "Let's have a look at that face of his." He dropped to one knee, grabbed at the mask and tore it off.

Agonized features showed. A twisted, contorted mouth; glaring, terrible eyes. Eyes with a film over them, eyes that might have been blue and certainly were fish-like. Eyes that— And I bent closer, then jerked back.

"Good God!" I cried. "It's Teddy Melrose."

"Yes—Melrose." The man on the floor gasped out the words. "They took my money from me. I wanted it back. I knew Brackenbridge when I had money. He sold me out for a note. A lousy fifty thousand dollars when I was worth millions. Millions, I tell you! I wanted them again. Millions! I—I—" He paused, looked at Brown. "But she's dead—she's dead. At least, I have vengeance."

Claire Vaugne was on her feet, Brackenbridge was muttering something to himself, Brown was at the telephone. I heard him talking to Mortimer Doran. I don't know what he said, but he turned to Halley.

"I've got to go, Halley. There's a good fellow! Stay and see the police. It's a woman, Halley—a woman I loved. She's dead, and I— You understand."

Maybe Halley didn't, but he nodded as he knelt by Teddy Melrose. "You don't have to report to me," Halley said to Vee. "You can tell your own story. God! Brown. For a crack shot, you certainly shot this man to pieces."

Brown smiled sadly. You think he'll live?"

"Live!" Halley's laugh was not meant to be funny. "Why—you blasted everything out of him. Better get going if you don't want to meet the cops."

"Yes." Vee turned to the girl. "Come along, sister. You did your stuff." He half led her from the room.

WE were out of the house and well down the block before I spoke. "Do you want me to run ahead for a cab?"

"No," said Brown. "Johnny Fitzpatrick will be there if Melrose telephoned him. He'll be waiting for the pay-off. I telephoned Wong earlier; he'll have the car around this corner."

Brown was very calm, very quiet as he gave orders to drive the "young lady" to our apartment and get her in the back way. "Don't you worry, Claire," he told her. "We'll see that you're paid for that crack on the head. I'll be back to arrange a hotel for you, until things straighten out."

"But my clothes! I forgot them—everything is at that house."

"Collins will attend to that, and be well paid for it too. You wouldn't think, to look at him, that there was romance in his heart."

Vee smiled—that little twisted smile. It was as if he didn't realize that Pal was dead. Then he turned to me. "Are you going with Miss Vaugne or with me?"

"Vee!" I turned to him. "Will you—I want—I want to go with you."

He held my arm as the car drove away, looked up and down the street. I too saw the distant lights of a taxi. "You know what I'm going to do, and you want to come with me?" he asked.

"What are you going to do?" I put it as a question, but I knew.

"I'm going to kill Johnny Fitzpatrick."

I gulped, nodded. "All right, Vee—if you must. I won't interfere, but I'm going with you."

In the cab, he said: "Pal is dead, and the man who murdered her still lives. Even you, Dean, can't think that's right. I'm just a killer tonight—"

"Vee. Vee!" I had hard work talking. "You can't just go to murder. Tonight—God! You were really going to shoot Melrose, dying there on his back?"

He looked straight at me. I caught his flashing black eyes in the glare from the street lights. "I don't know, Dean. Honestly, I don't know. But you thought so." And suddenly, "So it was Teddy Melrose, eh? He wanted money. He hated people. And he was right. There has to be a first time!"

"No wonder he knew everything the police did, being so close to Inspector Ramsey." I was trying to make conversation. A minute later I said: "You, Vee. Did you suspect Melrose?"

"To you— No! Not in the slightest. To the papers— Well, I won't lie to them—that is, not directly—but I'll smile rather knowingly. You can let us out here, driver."

And that last almost casual order sent my heart right into my throat. I was going with Vee to kill a man.

I had never seen Brown more quiet, more sure of himself. He explained that as we reached the entrance of the walk-up apartment, found the outside door open and slipped inside.

"She's dead, Dean. I can't alter that. If she were alive I might go dashing up

those stairs to—to my death. But there's no hurry now. Afterward I suppose it will get me, but now"—he found the bell he sought and pressed his finger against it—"Johnny Fitzpatrick will be waiting, expecting the Murder Syndicate."

THERE was a steady click of the snapping lock on the door. Brown reached out, pushed the door open. We stepped into the dimly lit hall. Vee closed the door slowly and carefully behind him and turned toward the stairs.

"What are you going to do, Vee—exactly?"

He looked at me a long moment there at the foot of the stairs. "I am going to shoot him to death—exactly." His whole attitude was free from any nervous excitement. "You surely wouldn't have it any other way. I know. I know! It can't be called anything but weakness—anything but vengeance. But I couldn't have him live. Afterward—"

"Afterward?"

He said simply: "I will never write music again. Oh, that's not the rambling of a broken heart, not even a sacrifice to ambition. It's just a fact. Somehow, I know it." And suddenly, in a hard even voice, "Come on! You will deaden your feet so it will sound like one man—the one man he's expecting."

Without another word I followed him up the stairs.

As we turned on the second flight Brown whispered over his shoulder: "Well lighted. We'll be able to see each other if he comes out into the hall. It'll be an even break there, Dean." And he laughed. At least, there was a queer sound down in his throat.

I was close on his heels when we reached the fourth floor, never slowing up in our steady pace, never pausing to listen—just going up.

We turned suddenly, stopped dead. We

were directly before the door, the open door of apartment 4-D. Johnny Fitzpatrick stood framed there in the light. His right hand was at his side, and his right hand held a heavy revolver.

Brown said: "Raise it if you want to, Fitzpatrick. Get inside!" And as I pressed behind Vee and followed Fitzpatrick, who backed into the apartment, Brown went on, "Don't drop it, Fitz—don't drop the gun. That won't save you now. If you want it to be plain murder I don't mind."

The door sprang closed behind us. We were in a small living room.

Johnny Fitzpatrick was a fine-looking man, well over forty, I guess, graying slightly at the temples. His sharp eyes were gray and held a sort of perpetual humor in them. Yes, they held it even now—puzzled, perhaps, but certainly without fear.

"What are you doing here, Brown?" he asked, and his voice didn't tremble. Firm hard lips snapped closed after he spoke—nothing else.

"I'm going to shoot you to ribbons, Johnny." Brown's eyes narrowed, his right hand came up. "That's why I didn't just kill you in the hall. Now—"

A woman shrieked. A small figure dashed from the bedroom, was across the room, almost in Vee's arms before I knew the truth, spotted the red head that pounded itself against his chest. Yes, it was Gertrude la Palatin—Pal—alive and well.

THE explanation came then. Johnny Fitzpatrick stuck a cigar in his mouth while he talked. "Of course," he said, "I thought it was you and not Ramsey or Teddy Melrose who stuck Pal on me. But I knew from the beginning it was a plant. I've been out of the city, but I

keep myself informed. I guess it hurt me, Brown—hurt my pride—that you and the little lady connected me up with the Murder Syndicate. And I wanted to get him—not entirely for the money; but, you see, I'm getting on now, and the past—well, at night it has a habit of going to bed with me. Pal knows all about that. Believe it or not, I felt like squaring myself with myself—and getting the Murder Syndicate would do that.

"So I laid my own trap. I talked all over my mouth along the Avenue, argued that the head of the Murder Syndicate was a great guy and knew his business, that I could use money, and if the boys of today didn't have the stomach for his racket—why, I did. Of course I never suspected Melrose. And the Murder Syndicate fell for my little monologue, got me on the phone and offered me five grand to snatch Pal. I played him along, took Pal into my confidence on the promise she wouldn't squawk to you, and worked the snatch."

"But, why?" I asked.

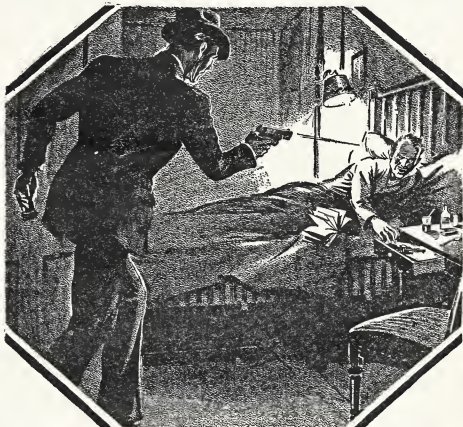
"Because he'd trust me, come here for her. And I'd put the finger on him. It would have worked too, I guess. Yes, tonight he rang me up, told me to give her the works, leave the body in the apartment and he'd take care of it later." Fitzpatrick nodded grimly. "I'd have been here when he came."

Brown grinned, shoved out his hand. "Maybe it's just as well, Johnny, that I didn't shoot you to death. But there's no reward for you. I've planned to send that money to Stacey's wife, in Illinois." His lips curved into that little crooked smile. "It'll buy her a better husband. I—" He stopped, started to hum, looked at Pal. "There's a song there, kid—a real one. It goes like this—'I'll buy me a better husband, I'll purchase another man—'"

Chuck Evans and Joe Getts were just a couple of smart guys—two of a kind—who happened to get caught up in the same brain storm. But when the shooting and shouting died, it didn't take either one long to see that smarty vs. smarty can end in a draw as well as a win, and blast hell out of anybody's—

AUTOMATIC ALIBI

by Carl Clausen



He looked up as the door creaked and reached for his gun.

CHUCK EVANS was smoking his after-supper cigarette by the gas log and looking at Flossie, his wife, through a hole in the newspaper which he was ostensibly reading. He had fallen into the habit of observing her surrepti-

tiously of late, in a detached sort of fashion, as if she were a specimen presented to him for classification.

Once upon a time, Mr. Evans had loved her in the possessive way in which men cherish things hard won. Like his other

extra-legal activities, she represented a definite quantity of effort. He had taken her from another by the right of conquest.

The other man was Joe Getts.

Chuck scrutinized Flossie through the hole in the paper. She was mending a run in a silk stocking by the light of the bridge lamp. Her lips were too red, her hair too platinum. These were the obvious details. They evoked no thought of censure. Chuck liked his women vivid. What irked him was the knowledge that the sudden tender curve of her lips, as she bent forward at her task, was for Joe—not him.

Mr. Evans was not given to self-analysis, so he merely wondered what a good-looking broad like Flossie could see in a gorilla like Joe Getts, and he smiled mysteriously behind the newspaper as he toyed with the idea of what he meant to do to that simian this night.

Presently, he laid the paper down and glanced at his wrist-watch.

"Guess I'll be going over to the Dutchman's," he said. He had made this remark, three—sometimes four and occasionally, five—nights a week for the past year, but tonight he injected an extra note of casualness in the statement.

The Dutchman's was a poolroom where men of his kind congregated and discussed ways and means. The four flea-bitten pool tables were an excuse to permit the police to collect the license fee. In the rear room, one could buy anything from a hypodermic needle to a gat.

"Wish you'd go up to the storage and get my fur coat," Flossie said without raising her eyes from the stocking. "It's glacé and all ready. The paper says it's going to be cold tomorrow."

"You mean that joint way up on Amsterdam and Ninety-fifth?" he demanded.

"All right, never mind," she retorted. "There was once you'd have run yourself ragged for me."

A fitting answer rose to his lips; but a thought flashing into a secret and hidden chamber of his tortuous mind, he kept his peace.

He consulted his watch again, and compared it with the clock on the mantel. Unknown to Flossie, he had set both ahead half an hour—for purposes of his own.

"Why don't you phone them and tell 'em to deliver it?" he asked.

"Because tonight's Saturday night. They won't make deliveries after eight; but they're open till midnight."

"All right," he grumbled, "I'll get it."

AS HE went down on the automatic elevator, Chuck Evans smiled to himself. Amsterdam and Ninety-fifth was way uptown, far from where he meant to be earlier in the evening. It would provide him with an additional link in the cleverly constructed chain which was to be his alibi for the evening.

Mr. Evans never depended upon friends for his alibis. He was essentially the lone wolf type and never delivered himself into the hands of another, friend or enemy. His alibi was a more subtle one. The man he intended actually to rub out was not Joe Getts, but another—one Manuel Cortez.

The set-up was as follows: Mr. Getts had recently essayed to terminate the existence of Mr. Cortez by spraying him with lead from a cruising cabriolet, but the body of Mr. Cortez' own hack had been re-inforced with bullet-proof steel for just such an eventuality, so Manuel had merely taken to his bed with a slight wound in the thigh.

Both Mr. Getts and Mr. Cortez had sworn to get Mr. Cortez and Mr. Getts, as soon as the former was able to be about again, and the florists adjacent to Columbus Circle were placing tentative orders with Jersey nurseries in anticipation of the event.

Per se, Chuck Evans had nothing against Manuel Cortez, beyond the fact that he did not belong to that branch of the human race known as Nordic, of which Mr. Evans himself was a conspicuous member. Mr. Cortez had merely singled himself out for his special attention by being an enemy of Mr. Getts, and getting himself in the way of Joe Getts' slugs. It was a situation for which Mr. Evans had waited in his patient way, ever since he had verified his suspicions of Flossie and Joe.

Technically, there was no reason why Chuck Evans and Joe Getts should be on the outs. Each controlled his own definite racket, and neither had been known to encroach on the other. Ostensibly, they were the best of friends. They had even been known, now and then, to join forces in discreet warehouse robberies when their respective supplies ran short. Once or twice, they had appeared in court with as plausible alibis for each other as the legal machinery required.

To the world, Chuck Evans and Joe Getts were just a couple of guys, trying to get along in adjoining neighborhoods by observing the rules of the game.

All this made excellent stage-setting for what Mr. Evans meant to do, which was simply to call on Manuel Cortez after dark, and finish what Mr. Getts had begun. The police of course would not suspect him of so fell a purpose, since there seemed no reason on earth why he should shoot Mr. Cortez. And with his customary attention to detail, Mr. Evans had laid out the evening's activities.

Emerging from the apartment house in which he lived, he went directly to the Dutchman's. He found present there, among others, Joe Getts, in person, as he had known he would. As it was the unwritten rule at the Dutchman's to check one's gun at the counter before gaining

admission to the room at the rear. Mr. Evans surrendered his automatic pistol and laid it on the shelf behind the cash register in the small compartment which carried his name. Next to it, in a compartment similarly marked, lay Mr. Getts'. Both pistols were standard types of the most recent and popular make, thirty-eight caliber, and except for their maker's numbers, alike as a pair of identical twins. But Mr. Evans knew that to an expert on ballistics, the projectiles that issued from them were, under a powerful magnifying glass, as different as is a pea from a pearl.

Therefore, when Mr. Evans deposited his gun on the shelf, he laid it in Mr. Getts' compartment and placed Joe's where his own should have been. It was one of those little slights-of-hand for which Mr. Evans was justly famous.

In the back room, immediately thereafter, cards were produced. Chuck played stud with Mr. Getts and a satellite, winning in the course of time, forty-two dollars.

MR. GETTS was restless. After an hour's playing, he arose, intimating that the game was too slow for him, and that he had business elsewhere. Chuck did not inquire where, for he knew very well where Joe was going. He had even arranged that Mr. Getts should be there.

Joe Getts went to the shelf behind the cash register to get his gun. He was about to do what Mr. Evans had done—switch weapons—when in picking up his own from Mr. Evans' compartment, he noted by a slight scratch on the butt of it, that it had already been done for him. He glanced over his shoulder at the Dutchman, but that worthy was deeply immersed in a copy of *Candid Confessions*. He also winked at his own image in the fly-specked mirror over the Dutchman's head, as he replaced the pistol where he

had found it and picked up the one Mr. Evans had intended he should.

As he went out, he hummed a gay little tune from a gay little movie. Immediately he set about throwing a monkey wrench into Mr. Evans' elaborate machinery.

Chuck, himself, left the Dutchman's almost at once. In the holster under his left armpit was Joe's pistol. With his customary caution, he had checked on that little matter with the maker's number. He, too was in a pleasant, jocular mood. Sauntering down the street to the local cinema house, he engaged the brunette cashier in conversation to impress his presence on her mind.

After chatting pleasantly with her for some moments, Mr. Evans bought a ticket, went within, and dropped into a seat near one of the fire exits. He had already seen the picture at matinee that afternoon. Now he stayed just long enough to assure himself that the program had not been changed in any essential detail, so that he would be able to discourse upon it intelligently, should such be necessary.

Then, watching his chance, he stepped across the aisle when the usher's head was turned, and departed quietly, leaving a very small piece of wood in the crack of the door—not thick enough to cause a draft, but sufficient to keep the latch from catching and locking the door. The exit opened on an alley, and this, in turn, led into a side street.

Once in this street, Mr. Evans worked fast. Diving into the nearest subway, he boarded an express train and rode downtown.

The place where he got off has been sung in poetry and prose, a shocking place where yellow men, they say, do unspeakable things in unspeakable ways. Where the elevated roars along a street that has been, in turn, a quiet lovers' lane, a stately turnpike, an artery of commerce, a cruising ground of sailors on furlough and

courtesans on high heels, and the theme of a ribald song. It is now but a sad place of rescue missions with no one to rescue, pawnshops, when there is little to pawn, second-hand stores, cheap coffee houses and cheaper cinemas.

Why Manuel Cortez chose to live in this neighborhood had always been a mystery to Chuck. He was making plenty of money. Himself, fastidious to the point of felinity, he shuddered at the odors that assailed him. He came to this region rarely, and then only to confer with one Maurice Klopfel, a pawnbroker, about the marketing of such trinkets as came his way in the routine of business.

Passing Mr. Klopfel's place of business, now, in the shadows of the opposite side of the street, he glanced hurriedly through the grimy windows. Mr. Klopfel was not in sight, and the door leading into the little room at the rear was closed, a sure sign that he was in conference. That the conferee was Joe Getts, Mr. Evans had not a doubt—for he himself had seen to it that Mr. Getts got a telephone message from Mr. Klopfel, anent a certain trifle in the way of diamonds set in platinum, which could be had for the proverbial song. Mr. Getts' hobby was baubles at cantata prices. He distributed them among his feminine friends at random, and not always wisely.

Mr. Evans had not the slightest doubt that the trifle in question, a bracelet, was destined—in Mr. Getts' imagination—to adorn the slender wrist of his Flossie, after he himself had been somewhere interred.

HE could, of course, have shot Mr. Getts forthwith, but aside from the risk of arrest and conviction, there were other reasons why this was inexpedient. Mr. Getts was popular with his mob; also he was a power in politics in his neighborhood, as Mr. Evans was in his.

In these days of investigations and Tammany disfavor, one had to forget personal desires and work for the common good.

The home of Manuel Cortez was a three-story walk-up. In its palmy days, when the Bouwerie was in the stately turnpike stage, it had been the abode of gentry. On the left brownstone-buttress of the stoop reclined a headless Nubian lion; on the right, what was left of its twin.

Mr. Evans reconnoitered for a moment to assure himself that the coast was clear. Then, he walked softly through the alley, inserted a jimmy under the sash of the rear window, and presently found himself in a kitchen smelling strongly of garlic, fried olive oil and wine.

The combination made Mr. Evans slightly nauseated. He paused dizzily, drew out his flashlight, and made his way upstairs, guided by an overlying motif of iodoform. The odor led him straight to Mr. Cortez' sick room. That gentle Latin was sitting up in bed reading *Little Caesar*, by the light of a shaded bridge lamp, and chewing bettel-nut.

He looked up as the door creaked and reached for his gun, but he was too slow. Two spurts of flame stabbed the semi-darkness of the room, and he shuffled off his coil with the gentlest little shiver.

Mr. Evans left forthwith. As he departed by the kitchen window, he dropped Joe Getts' pistol in a bed of chrysanthemums that by some miracle grew under it. To have left the weapon in the room with the remains of Mr. Cortez would have been too crude. Among the flowers, it would appear that the assassin had lost it by accident.

As he walked quickly to the nearest subway entrance, he drew off the old pair of gloves he had been wearing for the occasion, and threw them into the gutter.

There would be no fingerprints on the gun except Joe's.

When he got back to the cinema house he paused, peering through the crack of the door of the fire exit until the usher was elsewhere. Then he slipped within and slid into the nearest vacant seat.

The whole thing had taken less than three-quarters of an hour.

He saw the program to the end, chatted with the brunette cashier on his way out, then took the West Side subway to the fur store in Amsterdam Avenue near Ninety-fifth Street.

Here, he presented the check for Flossie's coat and with the garment over his arm, prepared to board a downtown train as quickly as possible. He was in a hostile neighborhood and did not care to tarry there without a gun. One Limp Moran lived, worked and held sway from Columbus Circle north, and west of Central Park. And Mr. Moran insisted upon charging his limp to a bullet from Mr. Evans' trusty gat, the result of a slight misunderstanding.

Just as he was about to descend into the subway at Broadway and Ninety-sixth Street, Officer Cassidy strolled around the corner swinging his night-stick. He glared at Mr. Evans.

"What you doin' up here?"

Mr. Evans indicated the coat on his arm, and explained the circumstances.

"And you had to pick a cleaner in Limp Moran's neighborhood? Cat sweat! If there's any shootin' on this beat, I'll do it, see! Beat it!"

"I was just going," Mr. Evans retorted firmly, but not too firmly.

"Foine; an' kape goin'!" Cassidy admonished.

It irked Mr. Evans to be addressed thus by a mere flatfoot, but being without concealed means of support, he did just that. An express train pulling in, he boarded it hastily and dropped into a vacant seat.

It was not often that Mr. Evans examined his microscopic soul, but the unqualified success of the evening, plus the lucky break of Cassidy's showing up and adding his mite to an alibi, already overflowing, put him in a mellow mood. Perhaps he *had* neglected Flossie a bit of late, he thought, as he stroked the seal fur.

She had gone to bed when he got in, so he hung the coat over the back of a chair. As he did so, the mantel clock struck twelve. He glanced at it with a smile of approbation, then opened the glass door and set it back half an hour to the correct time, and did the same to his wrist-watch.

BREAKFAST the next morning, he tried to invest with a mildly festive mood. The toast was slightly burned as usual, but he made no comment. The coffee was not all that could be desired, but he drank it without a scowl.

Flossie looked at him thoughtfully. Her hard blue eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Where was you last night?" she asked casually.

"Why," said Chuck, "I went to the Dutchman's and to the movies and then uptown for your benny."

"Oh, yeah? Well you took a helluva long time about it."

Mr. Evans smiled. "Ain't getting jealous, are you?" he asked jocularly.

"What of?" she demanded, looking him up and down—mostly down.

Mr. Evans blinked. "What's eating you, this morning?" he wanted to know.

"Moths!" she snapped.

The morning paper being at that moment slipped under the door, she went and got it.

If there was one thing that infuriated Chuck, it was the habit she had of standing in the middle of the kitchen, munching toast and scanning the front page without comment, when he wanted to see who

had been rubbed out during the night. But this morning, he knew who had been, so he merely watched Flossie's face. He gleaned nothing from her expression, so he concluded that Mr. Cortez' demise had missed the morning editions.

When Flossie finally laid the paper down, he saw that his surmise had been right. Nary an agate line of Mr. Cortez' departure from this vale of tears.

Chuck spent the rest of the morning helping Flossie with the dishes and being generally in the way. Her caustic comments merely evoked the gentlest of smiles. He wanted to be on hand when the news of Joe Getts' arrest came along.

He was just about to go down to the corner to see if the noon editions had come out, when the bell rang. He went to the door and answered it. It was Lieutenant of Detectives Paul Ames, and Captain Rice of the Homicide Squad.

"The chief wants to see you, Chuck," said Captain Rice.

"Who—me?" said Chuck. "What for?"

"Something about a fur warehouse over in Jersey," Rice said. "Somebody cleaned it out last night."

"I haven't been in Joisey for a month," said Chuck. "Besides, I don't do business on that side of the river."

Captain Rice nodded. "That's what I told the chief; but orders are orders. He wants the frau to come along, too."

"What for? What would Flossie know? She never mixes in business."

"I know. But the chief said to bring her in. Tell her to put her hat and coat on."

"All right, have it my way," said Chuck.

The police auto was waiting downstairs. The four got in, Lieutenant Ames at the wheel. He was a tall, bronzed man. He leaned over the steering wheel like a hard-riding cowboy, as the car weaved through the traffic with the siren screaming.

WITH Chief of Police O'Neill was District Attorney McLaughlin. The D. A.'s steel-gray eyes sized Chuck up from under their bushy brows. Flossie had been left in the outer room.

Mr. Evans smiled at the two men.

"What's this about a warehouse job in Joisey, Chief?" he asked. "You wouldn't frame me, would you?"

The chief pointed to a chair and Chuck sat down.

"Where were you last night, Evans?" he asked.

"Who—me?" said Chuck—his favorite retort when gaining time was the essence of the argument. Then he reeled off his evening's activities—slightly censored—with the ease and confidence of one who knows he has a perfect alibi.

"I see. What time did you get home?"

Mr. Evans thought quickly. The episode with Officer Cassidy called for a slight modification of the time element.

"Half past eleven," he replied with the dignity of conscious virtue.

The chief made a note on a pad.

"You are sure that you stayed at the movie as long as you say you did?" he asked.

"Sure did. Ask the cashier girl. She saw me go in and come out." He offered, in addition, to give the chief a resumé of the entire plot, including the news reel and the Mickey Mouse comedy. But the chief waved it aside.

"Let me see your rod, Evans," he said.

"I don't lug no rod, Chief—not any more."

"What did you do with it?"

Mr. Evans considered. This was somewhat of a quandary. If they had found the pistol on Mr. Getts, it would be no time at all before they traced it to him by the maker's number. Honesty seemed the best policy, at the moment.

"I sold it to Joe Getts," he replied glibly.

The chief said nothing for some moments, but he and the district attorney exchanged glances. He scribbled again on the pad, then handed the result over his shoulder to Lieutenant Ames, who left the room immediately. McLaughlin drummed the desk with his long, bony fingers.

Lieutenant Ames returned presently and handed the slip of paper back to his superior. The chief scrutinized it at length, then he said: "Cassidy stated that he ran into you at the subway entrance at Ninety-sixth and Broadway, at ten minutes past eleven.

"Check," said Mr. Evans happily. "And I live at Eighth Avenue and Forty-second. It was just half past eleven when I walked into my flat."

Chief of Police O'Neill glanced at the slip of paper in his hand.

"There seems to be a mistake, Evans," he remarked softly. "Your wife just stated to Lieutenant Ames that she heard the clock strike twelve when you came in."

Mr. Evans drew his breath in sharply. The idea of tampering with time had been merely to confuse Flossie should she be called to answer questions. He had achieved the effect, it seemed.

"She was in bed. She must have been dreaming," he replied, less happily. "She's all wet!"

"Maybe she is, but if she isn't, I'm just wondering why you're lying about the last half hour. It doesn't matter, one way or the other."

Chuck's lips parted, then came together with a click of teeth. "Is that why you brought me in—to ask me fool questions?" he demanded angrily.

The chief shook his head. "Not exactly."

Chuck wondered if someone had seen him in Manuel Cortez' neighborhood. Stalling for time, he said: "What's all this about, anyway? Am I supposed to

have ferried across to Joisey and done that warehouse job—all in half an hour?"

"So you admit that there is half an hour you can't account for?"

"Like hell I do! I went straight home like I told you!"

"You probably did, but still it won't do, Evans."

"What won't do?" Chuck demanded, feeling a premonition of disaster. "What's all this toid degree about?"

"It's about Limp Moran, Evans. He was found in the areaway of his apartment house with a bullet through his head."

MR. EVANS jerked back his head as if he had been struck with a black jack.

"What!" he exclaimed. "Well, for crying out loud! And you think I'd be dumb enough to croak him after having had Cassidy spot me there? Be your age, Chief!"

"You'd already killed him when you ran into Cassidy, Evans. He found Limp's body in the areaway just twenty minutes after you had gone. At precisely eleven-thirty."

"You're crazy. I told you I didn't carry no rod, no more."

"You haven't—since last night, Evans," the chief agreed. He opened the drawer of his desk, took out an automatic and pushed it across the desk to Mr. Evans.

"Recognize it?" he asked.

Chuck drew back. His face screwed itself into a forced smile.

"How would I? All rods of that make and caliber look the same. And I'm not having any, thanks," he added, rubbing the tips of his fingers on his knees.

"We won't need your fingerprints on it, Evans," the chief said kindly. "We checked the number. It was sold to you by Maurice Klopfel in the Bowery."

"What of it? I told you I sold it to Joe Getts."

"So you did," said the chief. He consulted, once more, the slip of paper which Lieutenant Ames had brought in. "Joe says you're a liar. He never bought any gun from you in his life. He's downstairs. Shall we bring him up?"

Mr. Evans was beginning to suspect that all was not well. Still, he believed that he saw a light in the offing.

"You took the rod off him, didn't you? That checks with my story of selling it to him?"

"Unfortunately it doesn't," said the chief. "Joe Getts lost his in Manuel Cortez' flower-bed on the getaway, and one of the city garbage men found this rod—yours, Evans—in a garbage can on Columbus Avenue around the corner from Limp Moran's apartment house."

"If he did, Joe Getts put it there himself!" Mr. Evans asserted vehemently. And then he asked innocently, "What would he be doing at Cortez's?"

The chief smiled.

"I forgot you hadn't heard—or had you? Manuel Cortez was also bumped off last night. Joe was in the neighborhood at the time of the killing. Klopfel, the pawnbroker, stated that he was in his place for the better part of an hour, haggling over the price of a diamond bracelet. We fixed the approximate time of the killing by Cuban Pete. He had just left Cortez to go over to Mott Street for some betel-nuts. When he got back, Cortez was dead."

The chief paused briefly, then added, "Both cases look so fishy that we kept them out of the morning papers. I don't think Joe put your rod in the garbage can, but you and your lawyer are welcome to that theory. Clever of you to plant the wife's coat in Limp's territory for an excuse if you were seen there, but I'm afraid it isn't going to do you much good."

Mr. Evans drew a deep breath. "So you're framing me for croaking Limp Moran!" he snarled.

Chief O'Neill's mild blue eyes hardened.

"I never framed a yegg in my life, and you know it, Evans," he said harshly. "If you have a better story—an alibi that will hold water—I'm here to listen."

Mr. Evans swallowed hard. He had one, eminently water-proof . . . but, he reflected sadly, it was hopping, literally, from the frying-pan into the fire.

"I'll say what I have to say to my lawyer!" he snapped.

The chief shrugged his shoulders.

"Have it your way." He paused. "I thought maybe you'd be willing to talk turkey, Evans. You had the time, the opportunity and the motive for killing Limp Moran. You haven't a chance."

"What you mean—toikey?"

"Well, the district attorney here, is willing to accept a plea of second-degree murder to save the state a lot of money. Joe Getts has already agreed to take the rap for Manuel Cortez. Both of you are entitled to medals, of course, but we're out of medals at the moment."

MR. EVANS ran his hand across his eyes to brush away the unpleasant vision that kept persisting there, the vision of Flossie, wife of his bosom, planting her fur coat in Limp Moran's do-

main, and of Mr. Getts being small enough to take advantage of his—Mr. Evans'—little joke in exchanging guns at the Dutchman's.

Chief O'Neill was still speaking.

"It's an open and shut case, Evans. We extracted the slug from Moran and our ballistic expert states that it came from your gun. Examination disclosed that the gun had been fired recently . . . The same holds good for Joe's rod—only it had been fired twice, so we have double proof there, so to speak.

"It may interest you to know, Evans, that never in all my years as a cop has so complete and satisfactory a chain of circumstantial evidence been pieced together in so short a time, and to Lieutenant Ames, here, belongs the credit . . . So perfect are the two cases that if it wasn't that you and Joe were pals, I'd think you'd framed each other."

He pushed a typed sheet across the desk to Mr. Evans.

"Sign on the dotted line, please," he said affably.

The two regarded each other across the glass-topped desk, in which many a hard guy had seen the reflection of his finish. Something resembling a wink in the mild blue eyes of the chief brought the faintest flicker of a smile to Mr. Evans' thin lips.

"O. K. with me," he said briefly, and reached for the pen.

In the Next Issue

CARDIGAN COMES BACK

—in—
FREDERICK NEBEL'S

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

Page after thrill-packed page of the kind of smashing action you've come to watch for and expect whenever that big dick from the Cosmos Agency is scheduled to appear. This time he gets himself mixed up in a murder mystery that has all the earmarks of accidental death—and would have gone down as such if the killer hadn't forgotten to put on his asbestos gloves when Cardigan stepped in.

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

for
SEPTEMBER 15th

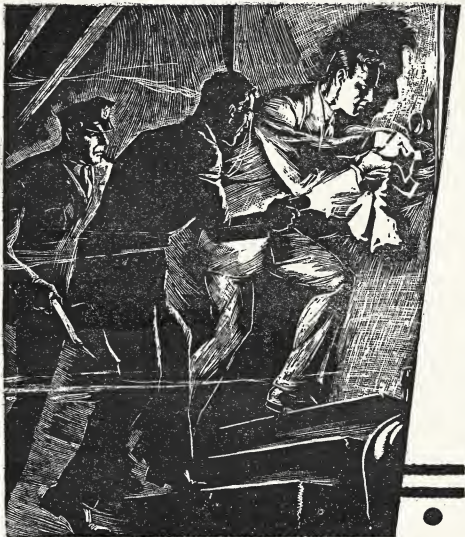
It will be out
on
AUGUST 31st



Death On Delivery

One by one those corpse-freighted terror trunks had been burst open—the body's limbs in each case frozen stiff, yet the death cause obviously asphyxiation. What was the reason for this mad contradiction of clues? Why, Detective Oakley asked himself, should even the craziest killer gas a man to death—then chill only the victim's arms and legs against decay?

door open!" Brixey urged.



An Oke Oakley Story

by Frederick C. Davis

Author of "Death Lights the Candle," etc.

CHAPTER ONE

Falling Star

CLAY OAKLEY, of Secrets, Incorporated, feeling in festive mood, and with his two assistants at his side—the pert, red-headed Miss

Charmaine Morris, and the aristocratic Archibald Brixey—mounted to the deck of the *Ocean Casino*.

The gambling ship lay at anchor more than twelve miles off the Southern California shore—a bit farther than the arm of the law could span—affording music,

drink, beauteous women, various games of chance, in short, all the revelry that Oakley craved.

Crossing the after deck, where couples were dancing to radioed music between selections from the ship's orchestra, he observed familiar faces. From Long Beach, swift launches had brought movie actresses in shimmering gowns, paunchy men who were Hollywood studio executives, and painfully handsome juveniles. Present also, were a few local worshipers doing obeisance to the God of Chance, and the usual allotment of sight-seers from Iowa. It was all very garish, playful and intoxicating.

"Stick close to Oke, Cherry," Oakley sighed to Charmaine Morris. "I see covetous eyes directed at you already. And let's make haste to lose a few hard-earned dollars on these crooked games."

"By Jove!" Brixey remarked, gazing upon soft faces and slender figures in the moonlight. "This is quite delightful!"

The breeze fluttered Japanese lanterns on deck; ice tinkled in tall glasses, cards flipped, chips clattered inside the main salon.

Glancing at Charmaine Morris' brilliant coiffure as he moved toward the nearest table, Oakley remarked confidently: "I'm playing my chances with the red."

THE roulette wheel was whizzing, and two bright eyes were watching the bounding ball, when the radio music gave way to the reproduced clang of a bell. Through the loud speaker an announcer's voice spoke quickly: "We interrupt to give you a news flash, ladies and gentlemen. The dead body of an unidentified man has just been discovered under peculiar circumstances on Roosevelt Highway at Santa Monica."

"Never mind," Oakley observed. "We came here to get away from business."

"A few minutes ago," the radio persisted, "an express truck, driving north, collided with a sedan, traveling south, wrecking both vehicles. The violence of the impact threw from the truck an old trunk, which burst when it struck the road. The body of a dead man fell out of it; a body clad only in underwear, bearing marks that seem to indicate murder. The hands and feet of the corpse appear to have been frozen, yet death was presumably caused by asphyxiation."

Oakley curled his arm through Cherry's and said happily: "Red wins, and I'm playing it again."

The announcer continued: "The trunk was an old one bearing the initials N. B., which had been freshly painted over. The driver of the express truck was severely injured, and has been taken to St. Vincent's Hospital. Therefore, full details concerning the accident are not available. The police have not identified the corpse, but they have revealed that the little finger of the left hand was amputated years ago, and there is an American flag tattooed on the right forearm. Anyone recognizing this description is requested to get in touch immediately with the chief of police of Santa Monica."

"The corpse," Brixey observed aloofly, "is a stranger to me. Red has won again, Oke."

"Oke has taken a sudden fancy to a brunette, Archie," Cherry remarked, "and this time, no doubt, he'll play the black—the fickle so-and-so."

Oakley said: "Nonsense!" but kept looking across the table at the ravishing brunette.

All that beauty could give was hers—a perfectly modeled face, an exquisite figure, grace of movement, and the reflection of uncommon intelligence in her lustrous eyes. Because it was Oakley's business to know all Hollywood faces, he recognized her as Claire Kent, an actress

of rapidly mounting popularity, whose presence in many Stupendous Productions had eased the eyes of multitudinous worshipping males. She appeared at the moment, however, distinctly uneasy and alarmed.

Turning quickly from the table, her satin gown glimmering with the movement of her lithe body, she hurried toward the forward deck. Pale and anxious, she paused, framed alluringly against the darkness outside, and glanced swiftly at Oakley. As Cherry Morris touched his arm, Oakley murmured: "Ravishing—and terrified!"

"Red has come up again, Oke, so let that be a lesson to you," said Cherry.

Oakley was again intent upon the spinning roulette ball, when exquisite perfume came to him and a soft hand touched his arm. "Mr. Oakley, please, may I see you—alone?"

He turned to look into the dread-filled eyes of Claire Kent. Her red lips were parted, her expression one of pleading. Oakley promptly bowed. "Of course."

"On deck," the actress whispered. "I know you're a private detective. It—it's of the utmost importance."

"Charmed," said Oakley.

The enchanting vision vanished. Oakley waited impatiently for the wheel to cease whirling as Brixey observed, "Really, some chaps get all the breaks," and Cherry Morris added dryly: "We're here to get away from business, are we?" Red clicked up again and Oakley pocketed a handful of chips, smiled and excused himself.

He stepped toward the door, stopped, groaned, and gazed balefully at the bulky man who barred his way. "You," he said. "McClane, your presence mars an otherwise pleasant seascape."

Detective-Lieutenant McClane, from Los Angeles headquarters, chuckled:

"Hello, shamus. We seem to turn up at the same places, don't we?" McClane smiled as Oakley stepped past. "But that shouldn't get under your skin. We've worked together on plenty of cases, and—"

"You mean," Oakley cut in dryly, "I've cracked cases for you that had you completely stumped, and you ought to be grateful. Instead, you have a childish notion that all private detectives—me in particular—are crooks in fancy disguise. At this very moment, you're itching to throw me into the cooler—"

"All right, all right, have it your own—" McClane broke off, and Oakley paused as he was stepping out on deck for, at that moment, a shrill, frightened scream rang out.

IT CAME from the lantern-lighted gloom forward—quick, sharp, breathless. It raised heads from the gaming tables, gave dancers pause; it brought the heel-beats of the ship's bouncers pounding through the moonlight. Then it came a second time, a strangled gasp, as Oakley shifted quickly to the promenade.

Somewhere forward, dull blows sounded and cloth ripped. Feet scraped, and flashing whiteness near the rail vanished downward swiftly. Quick footfalls raced away through the darkness and, from below, came a smacking splash.

"Man overboard!"

Oakley looked down on a terrified girl's face, red lips parted in a sputtering cry, hair wetly matted. An inky wave blotted her over.

McClane, shouldering close, bellowed: "Lower a boat!"

Wasting no time on thoughts of boats, Oakley stripped out of his white mess jacket, heeled off his shoes. Whiteness was flickering again through the black waves as he swung over the rail. He heard Cherry's voice exclaim breathless-

ly, "Oke—careful!" and straightened into a long, smooth dive.

He bobbed up at once, reached for a slender hand that was sliding out of sight beneath the surface. His pull upon it brought close to him a girl's figure. He hooked one arm beneath her chin and with the other grabbed for a life preserver that plunked down nearby. Treading water, he drew the girl's arms through it and shouted toward the gallery of faces peering down from the rail.

"Pull her up!" To the girl he urged: "Hang on! You're all right!"

The light now showed him the glistening features of Claire Kent. She choked and clung desperately to the white ring. As the rope lifted her, her gown, clinging skin-tight, trailed water. Oakley struck out smoothly toward the accommodation ladder as she was lifted over the rail.

The deck was in commotion when he trod wet footprints across it. Cherry Morris, eyeing him askance, kept at one side of him, the amazed Brixey at the other. Through the hubbub of voices that of Claire Kent was audible. "I—I lost my balance! I fell! I'm all right! Please—It was just an accident! Thank you so much! I—fell." She tugged around her a blanket that was brought by a steward, tried to laugh. A man in uniform was issuing crisp orders, directing that Miss Kent be escorted to a stateroom. She protested breathlessly that she wanted to be taken ashore at once. As she hurried to the rail, she flashed another glance at Oakley with eyes that desperately warned silence.

The swift launch sped from the *Ocean Casino*. The huddled blanket-wrapped figure of Claire Kent faded into the moonlight. Oakley's last glimpse was of her glistening, white face. He pulled another blanket around him as a voice said:

"Step this way, sir. We'll take care of you."

Brixey snapped: "He can jolly well take care of himself!"

"I think you're right, Archie," Oakley affirmed. "I've suddenly lost interest in this boat. It will be simpler to dry out at home."

He heard a chuckle, and turned to encounter McClane's tobacco-stained grin. "Always the hero," the detective bit.

"Always the horse's neck," Oakley retorted. "As dry as you are at this moment, McClane, you should be ashamed of yourself."

"Huh!" McClane said dully.

As the second launch bubbled its way swiftly toward the distant California shore, Cherry Morris, her red hair fluffing in the sea wind, watched Oakley with a wry smile. Archibald Brixey adjusted his monocle and looked bewildered. "She said she fell," he recalled. But—

"But is it exactly," Archie said, shivering. "For some reason the young lady was desperately anxious that no one know the truth. She didn't fall—she was thrown overboard."

Cherry Morris spoke up pertly. "Of course, she was thrown, Archie. It was Oke who fell—for her."

CHAPTER TWO

The Second Trunk

OAKLEY punched the bell of a modest house in Beverly Hills—modest, as judged by the grandiose standards of the Hollywood film colony, impressive by any other. He gazed at the car which, standing before the entrance, was powdered from bumper to bumper with alkali and dust. He glanced at his watch to see that it was shortly past nine P. M. Then watched Charmaine Morris powder her patrician nose before he rang.

"Strange," he observed, "that we

haven't heard from Claire Kent since last night."

"Is it, darling?" Cherry asked, frostily.

He took her squarely by the shoulders. "Snap out of it, Cherry! You know well enough that— Oh, hell! Quit being so much of a woman!"

She said distantly: "Did I mention that I'm considering accepting the five-year contract Max Sartman offered me last week to play in Stupendous Pictures?"

"Are you?" He leaned over and kissed her.

She stepped back, looked breathless, said: "Well, frankly, no."

"Oke," said Oakley.

The opening door disclosed a French maid who escorted them into an amber-lighted living room furnished with Spanish antiques. A man past middle age hurried from a chair to grasp Oakley's hand. He acknowledged the introduction to Cherry Morris with a worried glance and blurted: "I'm Sidney Sandwell, Mr. Oakley—Faith Lee's father. I need your help."

"I'm here for just that," Oakley answered coolly, taking a chair. As Cherry seated herself he consulted his notebook. "You returned to Hollywood later than you expected to when you telephoned me long distance, night before last, from Yuma."

Sidney Sandwell's was an unpleasant, pinched face; his eyes moved restlessly. "Yes, yes!" he answered, brushing nervously at his grayed temples. "You received the telegram I sent from Phoenix yesterday?"

"The one saying your return was delayed? I did."

"I've only just got back," Sandwell continued. "I phoned your office as soon as I stepped into this house. I've been driving from place to place, trying to find Faith. I'm at my wits' end. I thought

she'd run off with Brooks to be married, but—"

"Perhaps," Oakley suggested, "we'd better begin at the beginning."

"You—you know that Faith Lee, my daughter, is one of the most popular actresses in the studios. Her real name is Fay Sandwell. Her mother died years ago. She has been in pictures since nineteen thirty. Now she's almost at the top. We've lived here for the last year—Faith and I and Doctor Brenner, my step-son by an earlier marriage.

"Day before yesterday," Sandwell went on, "Faith came home from the studio early. She'd had a slight heart attack. She stayed in her room, resting, the remainder of the day. That evening, when I went in to see how she was feeling—she was gone.

"I telephoned the studio, and was told she wasn't there. Knowing that she—she fancied herself to be in love with Vernon Brooks, her director at Stupendous, I telephoned his place. I learned that Brooks was not at home. He had left the studio but no one knew where he was."

"And you thought—"

"I thought," Sandwell said nervously, "that Faith and Brooks had suddenly decided to get married, and had run off together. I'd tried to discourage her from considering Brooks as a husband. I was firmly convinced she shouldn't marry him. I became genuinely alarmed."

"Why?"

"I dislike that young man. Besides, Faith's contract has a non-marriage clause in it, and the contract would automatically be broken."

"I see."

"I immediately telephoned Yuma, Arizona—you know, California couples are always rushing there for quick marriages—but I could get no co-operation, Faith being of age. I decided to drive to Yuma.

I arrived there after midnight, but, so far as I could learn, Faith and Brooks had not appeared. I grew frantic. I telephoned you then, Mr. Oakley, because I was afraid—afraid something might have happened to Faith, and I wanted your help.

"I stopped at every town along the way, thinking perhaps they had gone beyond Yuma to avoid publicity. There was no word of them anywhere. I wired you from Phoenix, explaining that my return would be delayed. Mr. Oakley—it's possible she's been kidnaped!"

"You've had no demand for ransom?"

"No. I've been away, but the servants tell me no word has come."

"Your step-son, the Doctor Brenner you mentioned, was not here to receive such word if it came?"

"He left the city the same night Faith disappeared. I believe he went off for a short vacation. I don't know. He's a taciturn sort."

"And Vernon Brooks, the director, is also missing?"

"Yes."

"May I, see Miss Lee's room?"

SIDNEY SANDWELL led the way, along the hall, Oakley and Cherry Morris following briskly. They entered a large, modernly furnished bedroom, completely in order. A complete investigation showed that none of the girl's clothes were missing.

Oakley lifted an expensive purse from the dresser, unclasped it and found a small box containing many small white pills, bedded on a layer of cotton. "These are," he observed, "amyl nitrite pearls—used by victims of angina pectoris to alleviate attacks. Had she others on hand?"

"She was never without a supply, I can assure you. Lack of amyl nitrite may mean death to a sufferer from angina in case of an attack. If she left here of her

own will, she must have taken some with her, yet— I can't say that she had others."

Oakley, opening a compact, found a slip of paper inside it no longer or wider than a thumb. On it was written in an unfeminine hand—*La Hacienda, Arrowhead*. He kept the slip in his fingers, shut the case, eased his hand into his pocket.

"Look here," he said sternly. "If Miss Lee was kidnaped, she must have been taken from his house at night. If she left of her own accord, she went at the same time. She was not alone here. Where is your room—and that of Doctor Brenner?"

Sidney Sandwell indicated two doors down the hall. "Very close, you see. Yet I heard nothing."

"And Doctor Brenner was gone at the time you discovered your daughter's absence?"

"Yes."

Oakley entered the room of Doctor Norman Brenner. On bookshelves there were numerous volumes on biology and medicine. A look into the adjoining bathroom disclosed no shaving kit. Sandwell brought Oakley a photograph of a middle-aged, clean-shaven, studious looking man.

"That's Norman. His suitcase is not here. He packed and went without explaining where he was going or how long he would stay. The maid saw him drive away."

"Then it isn't possible that your daughter went off somewhere with Doctor Brenner, instead of with Vernon Brooks?"

"No. There are only two possible ways to explain her absence. She was abducted, or she ran off with Brooks to get married."

"But," Oakley suggested, "once she was married to him, which probably would have occurred soon after she left,

she wouldn't deliberately refrain from getting in touch with you—knowing her absence would worry you. Anyhow, she wouldn't go off to get married undressed.

"The remaining possibility, abduction, seems not quite logical, either," Oakley pointed out, "because there has been no demand for ransom. She couldn't very well have been kidnaped from the house without a disturbance, which you surely would have heard. When we come right down to it, we don't know what the devil has happened to Miss Faith Lee."

Sidney Sandwell's eyes widened anxiously.

"I am afraid she's been killed!"

Oakley's eyebrows arched. "Killed? What reason would there be for any one killing her? How could she have been attacked here in this house—as she must have been, since none of her clothes are missing—without either you or Doctor Brenner hearing some alarm?"

Sandwell's eyes became white-circled. "I—I don't know, but—there—there's another circumstance—"

"Which you've been holding back on me," Oakley diagnosed. "Unless you tell me everything you know, and at once, Mr. Sandwell, I will bow myself out of the case."

"No, please don't do that! I need your help desperately. I'll tell you everything I know about it, and—here." He removed a wallet from his pocket, and a paper slip from the wallet. He bent over a writing desk in the bedroom and scribbled. Quickly he handed Oakley a check written to the order of Sidney Sandwell and signed by Fay Sandwell to the amount of one thousand dollars. Sandwell had just endorsed it to Clay Oakley. "Is that sufficient as a retainer?"

"It is, providing—"

"Come with me!" Sandwell led the way quickly from the bedroom, talking breathlessly as he went. "Of course,

you've seen the morning papers concerning the accident on the Roosevelt Highway, in Santa Monica, last night. The trunk that burst open—containing a dead man's body—a man still unidentified by the police?"

"I know about it," Oakley said.

SANDWELL led the way out the rear of the house, into a spacious flagstoned patio bordered by gardens, lighted by the glow from the windows. "The trunk was an old one, with the initials N. B. on it."

"Yes."

"Like," Sandwell exclaimed, "that one!"

He indicated a trunk sitting near a rear door of the house. It was of an old-fashioned type, worn and scarred by much travel. On each end, near the leather handles, was a splotch of fresh black paint. Oakley approached it in surprise.

"You can see," Sandwell declared, "that the paint has been used to cover the initials, but they still show through."

Oakley's eyes sharpened. "N. B.—Norman Brenner! Have you the keys?"

"Perhaps they're in the store room. I haven't touched that trunk. I found it only a little while ago, when I got back. I—I dared not unlock it until you came."

He opened a door near the trunk, entered a store room filled with odds and ends of surplus house furnishings, snatched a ring of keys from a nail and hurried back as another door opened and the French maid looked out.

"A telephone call," she announced, "for Mr. Oakley."

"Get it, Cherry," Oakley said, taking the keys. "It's probably Archie." He thrust a key into the lock, as Cherry went into the house. Neither the first nor the second key turned.

Sandwell kept talking. "This trunk was kept in the store room. None of the servants know how or when it was brought

out here. There were two trunks just alike in the store room—but the other one is gone!"

The third key clicked and Oakley rose, unfastening the clasps. "You believe that the other trunk is the one which figured in the accident last night?"

"I'm afraid so."

Oakley threw up the lid of the trunk. He took a breath, said: "Evidently you're right."

Inside the trunk, curled with knees brought up to chin, clad only in underwear, resting on a matting of clothing, lay the dead body of a man.

"Good God!" Sandwell gasped. "That's Brooks!"

Oakley looked grim. "You're sure of that?"

"P-positive!" Sandwell blurted. "I've seen him many times. He—he's dead!"

"Very dead," Oakley agreed, and added: "There in the corner—it looks like a chauffeur's cap and tunic."

"Archie, as you suspected, Oke," Cherry said. "An urgent telephone call has just come from Miss Claire Kent. She wants you at her house immediately."

Oakley nodded briskly. He took the telephone from Cherry and heard Archibald Brixey's cultured voice sing over the wire. "I heard what Cherry told you, Oke. It's exactly right. The lovely Miss Kent is shamefully upset."

"Hop into a taxi and meet me in front of her home, Archie. Cherry is coming to the office to take your place. I'm on my way." Oakley pronged the receiver and turned to see Sandwell staring white-ly.

"What—what can we do?" Sandwell blurted. "God, it's frightful—finding that—" He broke off. "Oakley, you can't accept another case now. I've retained you! You've got to help me!"

"You'll get all my attention you need," Oakley answered. "I take it you're far

less concerned with what happened to Vernon Brooks than you are about your daughter. Nevertheless—here—"

He pushed the telephone at Sandwell. The gray-templed man's trembling hands awkwardly took it.

"Call headquarters."

"Headquarters? But—"

"It's a case for the police," Oakley said briskly, "because murder is involved. Not one murder, but two—possibly more. In such matters, private detectives step into the background. Lose no time, Mr. Sandwell."

"You think—Faith may be—dead!"

"Just say into that transmitter, 'Police headquarters,'" Oakley ordered. "An elephant named McClane will come tramping in here in no time."

CHAPTER THREE

Murder in Silhouette

OAKLEY brought his sleek roadster to a stop in front of another stucco house which sat prominently beside a winding road in Beverly Hills. He had sent Cherry Morris by taxi to the offices of Secrets, Incorporated, with instructions for getting various information. Now he strode to the iron gate at which the elegant Archibald Brixey was waiting.

"In," he said.

"Remembering Miss Kent very clearly," Brixey answered, "I comply with alacrity."

Oakley's ring at the door brought a Japanese man-servant who said, when he read the investigator's card: "Miss Kent wait see you." He led them along a tapestried hallway to a door at the rear, and knocked. Brixey affixed his monocle in anticipation of the Kentian beauty, but there was no answer. The man-servant said: "Maybe she sleep."

"She jolly well didn't sound sleepy

when she talked to me on the phone," Brixey observed.

"She very upset all day," the servant informed them. "Very indispense. Very nervous. Doctor say she must be quiet. She be quiet now."

"Too quiet," Oakley thought. And aloud, "Open the door."

The brown hand thrust wide the way. Oakley and Brixey looked in upon a lovely boudoir. A huge bed, satin-covered, its pastel sheets thrown back—empty—sat between broad windows, one of which was wide open. Beside it lay a pair of gold-and-black mules. Dainty. There was no Claire Kent in sight.

"Wait?" the Jap suggested tactfully.

Oakley nodded that they would wait, then indicated the exotic mules. "She would have worn those," he began, "if she had left the bed to—"

Glass crashed somewhere close at hand. Oakley spun about; Brixey's monocle dropped. The Jap made a throaty exclamation which was drowned in a louder, more alarming noise that thumped like brief thunder through the house. A shot!

Then, closely following it, a scream very like the one that had disturbed the sea air aboard the *Ocean Casino* the night before—a cry of terror.

Oakley sprang through the door with Brixey at his heels. The Jap was running back and forth in the hallway, hands fluttering helplessly. Oakley, peering at other doors, heard a soft thud, and felt the floor jar. He bounded forward once more, his hand slipping his automatic from its arm-pit holster.

"Archie! Outside!"

Another scream cooled his blood as he twisted at the doorknob. He pushed in upon a startling sight. This was another bedroom, and it had seen swift violence. A standard lamp had fallen against a French window, cracking a pane outward; the sash was standing open. Beneath it,

unconscious, lying beneath billowing satin that she had pulled from the bed, was Claire Kent.

Otherwise, Oakley's waving gun covered emptiness. He stepped over Miss Kent alertly, peered out, heard swift steps running through grass. A dark movement indicated that Archibald Brixey was going into action. Someone leaped across a patch of garden beyond, covered by darkness, and Brixey shouted: "I say! Stop!"

Far at one edge of the lawn a rustling sounded as the fleeing prowler fled through greenery. Oakley spotted Brixey sprinting in that direction, and swerved to cut off the assailant's escape. He leaped bushes, whirled against a stucco wall, darted back. Out of the gloom came a thump and a moan.

Somebody had gone down.

THE hedge rippled as an unseen person burst through it. Beyond, heels gritted on the cement. Oakley swung to push through, met the obstruction of a wall concealed behind the hedge, and was forced to go farther along till he came to a break. The roar of a motor dinned into the quiet as he dived through.

A car was speeding, without lights. Oakley whirled, scratched his way back through the hedge, saw Brixey unfolding unsteadily from the grass, and sped toward the house.

He legged in through the same window and went into Claire Kent's bedroom. The Jap was holding smelling salts beneath her comely nose, and she was pushing the bottle away. Oakley took up the telephone and began to dial headquarters.

"Don't!" the actress beseeched suddenly. "Don't call the police!"

Oakley's finger poised.

"No—please! Not the police!"

The girl's tone was so imploring, her eyes so desperate, that Oakley abandoned

the phone. He trod back to the hall to find Brixey staggering in through the side door. That young man's aristocratic chin was marred by a smear of blood. He was mopping at it with his handkerchief, ruffling his sparse hair and blinking.

"I do wish," he complained, "that we could take one case which wouldn't entail my getting clipped on the head. That blighter hit me with a telephone pole."

Oakley made a disgusted noise and returned to the bedroom. Claire Kent lay clad only in a filmy nightgown delicately adorned with fine lace. She was confusedly gesturing the manservant away. Oakley stepped close, draped the blue sheet over her beautiful form and nodded gravely when she said, "Thank you."

"What happened?" he asked.

"I was lying here, dozing," she told him, echoing the alarm she had felt at the moment. "I was awakened by someone seizing me. A hand closed over my mouth; I was pulled out of bed, and into the next room. Somehow, I managed to break away—I think I screamed."

"You did," Oakley affirmed, "and thereby saved yourself from being dragged out of the house. Did you see the face of the man who grabbed you?"

"No—not once!"

"A prowler," Oakley mused, "steals in through your bedroom window, grabs you, attempts to carry you away for the devil only knows what purpose—and you decline to have the police notified. Why?"

She sat up in alarm. "Mr. Oakley, above everything else—no publicity. None! Not the slightest! No matter what has happened, no matter what happens—my name has got to be kept out of this! That's why I want to retain you."

"Motion-picture actresses," Oakley observed, "don't usually shy from publicity."

She hesitated. "Mr. Oakley, you've got to understand. I have no delusions about myself. I'm a featured player through sheer good luck. I hold my own because of this manufactured beauty that Hollywood has given me. It's all I've got, all that keeps me working. But—there are thousands of other girls in Hollywood, prettier than I am, far better actresses. One of them could take my place overnight, and I'd never be missed."

Oakley warmed to the girl's refreshing frankness. "At the moment," he said gallantly, "I find that difficult to believe."

"Will you help me?" she pled.

Oakley thought. "I'll do everything I can to save you from unfavorable publicity," he said, "but circumstances may make that impossible. You see, so far I don't know what you're talking about—except that you know whose dead body crashed out of the trunk on the Roosevelt Highway last night."

"How—how did you know that?" She fairly gasped it. "How did you?"

"Before the announcement came from the radio on the boat, you were at ease," Oakley told her. "The moment you heard it, you became terrified. You recognized the description of the corpse in the trunk."

SHE nodded, settling back again, absorbed in troubled thought.

"Day before yesterday, I was working in the studio with Faith Lee in *When Lovers Part*. Faith was taken ill and went home. Vernon Brooks, the director, filled out the day taking scenes in which Faith did not figure. We finished work early in the evening, after dark. We were concerned about Faith, so Brooks and I decided to go to her house and see how she was. We went in my car.

"We were almost in front of Faith's home, when the door opened. The thing we saw startled all of us. A man came out. He was carrying a girl in his arms.

She seemed to be only partly clothed, and unconscious. He stepped away quickly, into the darkness, and because it was all so surprising, Anderson stopped our car outside the driveway."

"Yes?"

"The man put the girl in a car waiting beside the house. He didn't notice us. Brooks said, 'That was Faith—I saw her face!' Just then the car shot out of the driveway. Anderson said, 'I'd better follow that car.' It went like lightning—several times we thought we'd lost it—but we managed to follow it to a building on the campus of the St. Vincent College."

"You took its number?" Oakley asked.

"I didn't think of that. Brooks did—I heard him repeat a number, but I can't remember it now. Anderson must have noticed it, too, but in a moment you'll understand—It's so horrible, I—"

The girl steadied herself, her face white as alabaster, and continued.

"We stopped behind the car on the campus. It was dreadfully dark. Evidently the man we had followed had carried Faith inside the building. The windows were curtained, but some light was shining through the blinds. Brooks got out first and said, 'I'll see what the devil this is all about.' He went to the door and knocked, and when it opened, he stepped in.

"We saw him stagger, as though he'd been hit, and then the door closed quickly. Anderson got out of the car, ran to the door and tried to open it, but it was locked. He called, 'Mr. Brooks!' and there wasn't any answer. I stayed in the car because I was frightened. Anderson threw himself against the door. He did it three times—and the third time it flew open and he stumbled in."

"Yes?" Oakley said again, with mounting interest.

"I saw Anderson bring up short against

a long table. He was trying to regain his balance when an arm swung into view—just an arm. Anderson was hit on the head by something—terribly hard. He went down instantly. I was terrified; I think I screamed. Next that figure appeared in the door—just a black silhouette, a man with shoulders drawn down, his face shaded by a hat—holding something heavy in his hand. He started toward me—"

"And," Oakley surmised, "you tried to get away."

"I jumped out of the car and ran. He came after me, grabbed me. He struck at me and missed. I twisted away and pushed him. He stumbled and fell. He was getting up when I rushed back to the car. He was coming after me again when I started off. I got away from there as fast as I could—so terrified I hardly knew what I was doing."

"And all this time," Oakley asked, "you didn't see this man's face?"

"It was pitch dark. All I can remember was seeing him twice—"

SHE swallowed. "I rushed off the campus in the car, thinking only of telephoning the police. I didn't know what had happened. I didn't know what the consequences of calling the police would be. I realized that if murder had been committed, I would be involved. But anyway—I was going to call the police."

"But you didn't?"

Claire Kent said wretchedly: "I fainted."

"What? While driving?"

"No. I felt it coming—dizziness. I was cold as ice. I became afraid I would lose control of the car. I swung to the curb and stopped the motor—and fainted."

"And then?"

"I—I don't know how long it was before I came to. Apparently nobody had

seen me. I'd fallen over on the seat. I was weak and sick. What I remembered seemed like a nightmare. I began to realize that, if murder had been committed, it would mean front-page notoriety of the most sensational, damaging sort. It was selfish of me, I admit—but I drove home. I didn't call the police. I couldn't."

"A grave error, I'm afraid, Miss Kent," Oakley stated.

"I know! I made a dreadful mistake, but—" she declared it with admirable fierceness—"I'm glad of it! Above all, I'm going to keep my career. I've had to fight every inch of the way up—I'm going to be a star within a year—and I refuse to throw all that away through a sense of duty that might do no one else any good."

"Understandable," Oakley sympathized. "Certainly quite human. Go on."

"I came here. I couldn't sleep. Those were the most nerve-racking hours I ever spent. Because—just after I got home—the telephone rang. I took the call in this room. It was a man's voice, a strange voice. It said: 'Keep quiet! If you talk you'll wreck your career.' The voice was speaking the very thought in my mind. 'If you talk, I'll kill you!' That voice meant every word. 'I'll kill you!' it warned again—and then it was gone."

"The man who came here tonight," Oakley suggested, "came perhaps to carry out that threat? To eliminate the possibility of your talking?"

"I'm sure of it! I'm half mad with all this! You can never know how horrible that night was to me, nor the next day—yesterday. I grew more and more afraid as each hour passed, because Brooks and Anderson never came back!

"I tried to get my mind off it last night by going out to the gambling ship. I was there when—"

"Word came over the radio about the dead man in the trunk."

"Yes! I recognized the description immediately. It was Anderson!"

"That," Oakley said, "I suspected."

"It was a frightful shock. I was terrified. Seeing you, my first thought was to ask your help. I went outside, after speaking with you, because I felt faint again. I was walking along the deck when I saw—coming out of a doorway, toward me, looking at me—the same figure I had seen before!"

"The man who had carried Faith Lee from her house, the one you had seen in the door of the campus building?"

"Yes! There was no mistake, no possible mistake. I recognized that figure, standing against the light. I knew that he had been following me, watching me. I must have cried out without knowing it. He came at me—like a madman. I think he was infuriated because I'd recognized him, because I'd raised a cry. He grappled with me, threw me over the rail."

"Yet," Oakley told her, "you've called me in and you're telling me the story."

"There's no other way!" the actress declared. "And you must save me from the police!"

OAKLEY looked thoughtful. "Can you," he asked dubiously, "tell a good lie and stick to it no matter what happens?"

"I'll do anything!"

"All right. Here's your story. You left the studio that evening, driven by Anderson, in your car, with Brooks accompanying you. You were tired after a hard day's work. You had Anderson drive you here. You came into the house and went to bed. You're vague about the exact time, and your maid must be, too. The point is, you came directly here from the studio—you didn't go to Faith Lee's home."

"Yes!"

"Brooks had voiced his concern about Miss Lee—this is still your story. You had Anderson drive him to Miss Lee's home. Of what happened after that you know absolutely nothing whatever."

"Yes!"

"That's the story you've got to stick to. No matter how many cops bully you, that's all you know. Your promise to that is necessary before I go further with this matter."

"I promise it! I'll do it!"

"In that case," Oakley said, rising, "I'll send you my bill—later."

A knock sounded upon the door. Brixey rose, opened it, and the Japanese servant look in. "Man see Miss Kent," he mouthed. "Name McClane. From headquarters."

"Oh, Lord!" Oakley moaned.

Claire Kent snatched at Oakley's hand. He thrust a stern finger toward her shapely nose. "Stick to that story! Start telephoning headquarters right now, to tell them you've just learned that the dead body in the trunk is Anderson's. Let McClane interrupt you, but don't let him bulldoze you. If you do—you're sunk!"

To the Jap he directed: "Show that big ox in."

The anxious girl's eyes followed him as he left the bedroom. The man-servant was hurrying to the front entrance. Brixey, dabbing at his injured chin, followed Oakley to the side door. They slipped out as McClane's heavy heelbeats started up the hallway.

Oakley hurried to his roadster and slipped behind the wheel. He started the motor and said: "I'm a damned fool."

CHAPTER FOUR

McClane Blunders In

THE swinging headlamps of Oakley's roadster searched across a velvet

lawn as he followed the gravel roadway over the campus of St. Vincent's College. When he braked to a stop the gleam disclosed painted words above a doorway—*Biological Research*.

"This is it," Oakley said, as he got out.

The building was isolated from others in which lighted windows shone. Oakley went to the bleak door, glanced back, and pictured the episode related to him by the charming Claire Kent. About the place there was a smell of death.

The door, as he expected, was firmly locked. Oakley turned to the windows. Each was criss-crossed by heavy iron bars set into massive frames. The blinds were drawn. Oakley was half around the building when he paused at another door.

The lock on the first entrance had been of a formidable flat-key variety, recently added, but this was an ordinary type. Oakley's slender, L-angled steel pick probed into it and slid back the bolt. With Brixey at his side he stepped into darkness tinged with a faint animal odor.

He flashed his pocket light through several doors and saw chairs and blackboards. These were classrooms and of no interest to Oakley. At the end of the corridor he found a locked door. Again a tumbler mechanism defied him.

"The lab, is protected like a vault."

Nevertheless, he tried his pick. It was squeaking in the lock when Brixey said suspiciously: "I smell smoke."

Oakley straightened. "So do I."

Somewhere outside, a cry sounded. The second time it was intelligible—"Fire!" Oakley began to move quickly. Long strides carried him along the corridor as he thrust open swinging doors.

He stopped short with red light glaring in his face. He was looking into a classroom which he had passed by on his way to the inner entrance of the research laboratory. Flames were leaping among chairs piled up in the center of the floor.

Oiled wood was spreading a carpet of fire, and varnish was crackling.

Oakley sidled out the door through which he had come. On the side of the building opposite his car flaming red was flickering through a window. Across the campus dark figures were running. As they legged close, the glow disclosed them to be coatless, hatless, excited students. Dormitory windows were sliding up in the buildings beyond and silhouetted heads were poking out.

Oakley slipped past the corner. He was in his car and starting up when Brixey folded down beside him. The tires ground in the gravel as the roadster swerved toward the distant gate.

"We'll hope," Oakley observed as he twisted into a boulevard, "that none of the students sighted us and start trailing us. They'll put that fire out in a jiffy. The only damage done is a postponement of our burglarious activities. We're coming back, Archie."

A BRIGHT desk lamp gleamed in the inner sanctum of Secrets, Incorporated. Oakley had driven directly to his office. Now he had before him numerous reports prepared by the efficient and beguiling Charmaine Morris. As Brixey slumped in an easy chair, he jig-sawed them together.

Faith Lee—

Report from Dr. Emanuel Brose, her physician—Miss Lee afflicted with angina pectoris. Disease unusual under middle age and women less vulnerable than men, but F. L. had it. Like all angina sufferers she faced sudden death at any moment. Hard work in studios endangered her life. Sometimes used amyl nitrite pearls on set.

Report from Stupendous Studio—F. L. being paid \$2,000 weekly, on long-term contract.

Report from Second National Bank, Beverly Hills—Account in name of Fay Sandwell. Frequent checks for large amounts written to order of Sidney Sandwell.

Sidney Sandwell—

Typical Hollywood father. Lived on his daughter's income, loose and extravagant. Genuinely fond and proud of his daughter, but apparently his chief interest in her, the money she gave him. No life insurance. Her death will leave Sandwell without income, hence his anxiety.

Left Washington University medical school, education uncompleted, to marry Elizabeth Brenner, a widow with a son Norman. Resents step-son's success as scientist. Elizabeth Brenner died two years later. Married Ruth Kilgore, daughter Fay by her. Mother dead five years. Very poor until Fay got footing in movies.

"Strong financial reasons," Oakley murmured, "for Sandwell's wanting his daughter to remain safe and prosperous." He turned to the next report.

Dope on cadavers—

Marks on both corpses identical. Hands and feet of Anderson and Brooks severely frozen. (This in our balmy climate!) In each a large vein in the thigh had been opened, apparently after death, for very little blood flowed. In each, a needle puncture, unusually large, over heart, piercing to right auricle, but this was not cause of death. In each case, blows on head sufficiently violent to cause unconsciousness but not death. Carbon dioxide content of lungs very high; death due to suffocation. Since the thigh veins were opened after death, suffocation could not have taken place inside the trunks, unless the men were put into trunks, suffocated, removed, operated upon, then returned to trunks. This is unlikely, since in that case men must have been brought to Lee home alive, then killed and operations performed there. Indications are that both men were murdered in some strange fashion elsewhere, then brought to Lee home and put into trunks. Both deaths occurred night of 10th, exact time uncertain.

"Archie," asked Oakley of his assistant, "see if you can get any response from Doctor Brenner's biological laboratory at St. Vincent College."

Brixey took up the telephone as Oakley unfolded yet another report.

Dope on trunks—

Both were in store room of Lee home. Servants cannot say when they were brought out, but think it was following dinner on the 10th. Property of Norman Brenner.

At 9:30 P. M. on the 10th the Coastwise Trucking Company of Los Angeles received a telephone call from a man who said he was Dr. Norman Brenner, address that of Lee home. He wished a truck to come and pick up two trunks. One was to be driven to National Express Company depot in Santa Barbara. The other was to be taken to freight depot in Hollywood and shipped collect to San Francisco.

The expressmen called at the Lee home next morning. They picked up the trunk which was to go to Santa Barbara. It stayed in local express office until truck left on regular run that night. Trunk never reached Santa Barbara because of accident on Roosevelt Highway. It was doubtless the murderer's intention to go to Santa Barbara and ship the trunk out of there, to confuse tracing it. Accident upset this plan.

The other trunk, to be taken to Hollywood freight office, was not picked up by the express truck. Reason: the trunk was not crated. Trunks may be shipped as are by express, but are not accepted for freight shipment unless crated. Killer evidently did not know of this regulation. Result: trunk containing dead body of Vernon Brooks was left at the Lee home.

Brixey put down the telephone. "No answer from the lab," he asserted.

"That probably means the fire was put out and nobody went into the lab," Oakley asserted, and took up the report on Doctor Brenner.

No information available concerning Dr. Brenner's experiments. His work has been financed with funds donated by the college and by the C.W.A. Reason for secrecy not explained.

Brenner had indicated his intention of going away for a few days' rest, but told no one where he was going or when. According to servants at Lee house, left in his own car late on evening of 10th, about 10:30 P. M. Nothing about him in newspapers. Police are searching for him quietly, no public alarm issued.

"Doctor Brenner's flight and continued absence," said Brixey, "would seem to indicate guilt."

"We must not forget," Oakley reminded him, "that we have two purposes in this case. One is to locate Faith Lee. The other is to save Claire Kent from ruinous scandal."

FROM the outer office came a commotion that straightened Oakley in his chair. A voice rumbled, and heavy footfalls crossed the carpet purposefully. The door flung open and on the sill appeared Detective-Lieutenant McClane. Cherry Morris, voicing protests, was tugging indignantly at one of his arms, striving to keep him out. He ignored her, gnawed on a cigar, glared ominously at Oakley. "Call your red-head off!"

"Stop risking your precious life, Cherry!" McClane commanded. "McClane, do come in. I hope you trip over the rug and break your neck."

McClane tramped to the desk. "Just why," he demanded, "have you your fancy finger in this murder pie? Talk fast and don't try to kid me!"

"I?" asked Oakley. "You suspect me of so many things, McClane. Some day you'll try to jail me for stealing the Mona Lisa out of the Louvre."

"Come on!" McClane snarled. "You had a good reason for being at Kent's place last night. Her story sounds fishy enough to make me sure you cooked it up for her."

"Need you," Oakley asked, "be so uncomplimentary?"

"Listen!" McClane's cigar shifted threateningly. "All yesterday, Kent's chauffeur was missing—but she says she didn't know it. That smells!"

"The young lady was ill in bed all yesterday," Oakley countered, "because of the unpremeditated plunge into the Pacific which you witnessed the previous night,

McClane. Naturally, she didn't use her car, naturally she didn't call upon her chauffeur. What could be more reasonable than her not knowing about him?"

"So she's hired you, has she?" McClane demanded. "Her chauffeur gets killed in a cockeyed way, and she doesn't know anything about it—so why does she need a private detective?"

"To save herself from being trampled on by a rhino named McClane," Oakley answered. "There's no reason for dragging her into the case and ruining her career, and I'm going to see that you let her alone. There's your answer, if you can grasp it."

McClane heaved closer. "Just tell me something, shamus. If Anderson, the chauffeur, drove Brooks from Kent's place to Lee's house, and never showed up again—how come the car he drove is back in Kent's garage right now and has been ever since the murder?"

Oakley uttered a silent moan. Brixey's monocle dropped and his face flashed pale.

"Well? How come that?" McClane demanded.

Oakley said quietly: "How should I know?"

"You know, all right! Kent's story doesn't click. If Anderson didn't drive that car back himself—who did? I'll tell you. Somebody who knows what happened to him! Somebody who's holding out and trying to slide from under. Somebody who's mixed right into the middle of these killings and trying to play innocent—Kent!"

Oakley sprang to his feet. "McClane," he snapped, "get the hell out of here before I bounce you out!"

McClane blinked. "I'm going, all right," he rumbled. "When I see you again, Oakley, I'll have a warrant for you. Wisecrack out of that!"

OAKLEY sat down and mopped his face. Brixey replaced his monocle, which rapidly fogged with the moisture oozing from his pores. Cherry Morris said with caught breath: "Oh, Oke! You fool!"

"The detail of Miss Kent's car being in her garage," Brixey exclaimed, "is one you jolly well overlooked, Oke!"

"You're telling me!"

Oakley removed from his wallet the slip of paper he'd purloined from Faith Lee's bedroom. He gazed at it intently and said: "Cherry, you're coming with me. Bring a stenographic notebook and plenty of sharp pencils. Archie, hold down the fort. We've got to move fast to keep one jump ahead of McClane, or he'll collar me!"

"Fool," Oakley snapped, as he slipped behind the wheel of his roadster, "is correct. It wouldn't be so bad if McClane weren't dead right!"

The car shot onto the Boulevard and turned swiftly east.

"Where," asked Cherry, "are we going so precipitously?"

"Straight," said Oakley, "from the frying pan into the fire, no doubt!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Challenge of Death

OAKLEY drove swiftly through suburbs. Presently he was sending the car up a steep, winding road. At the end of an hour he approached a neat little town sitting at the edge of a sparkling mountain lake—Arrowhead. He drew into a parking space before an impressive stucco hotel at the edge of the water.

With Cherry Morris at his side, he strode into the lobby and of the desk clerk he inquired: "This La Hacienda?"

"Yes."

"I want to see your register for the last

few days, beginning with the night of the tenth.

"We never—" the clerk began to protest, but the crisp crinkle of a twenty-dollar bill in his hand, changed his frown to an obliging smile.

Oakley stepped behind the desk, looked rapidly through an index of registration cards. He lifted one from the B's, read the name of Doctor Norman Brenner and said: "Ah!" The blue time-stamp on the card he studied closely. "Doctor Brenner," he asked, "arrived here at about twelve thirty on the night of the tenth?"

"Yes."

"He's been here ever since?"

"Yes."

"Doing what?"

"Resting all the time, evidently, except for a few swims in the lake and a hike or two around it."

"Is he in or out at the moment?"

"In."

"We're going up," Oakley declared, "unannounced."

They went up to the sixth floor. Oakley knocked at a door, the number of which corresponded with that recorded on the registration card. It was opened by a middle-aged man with a tired face and rumpled hair. He was clad in a blue bathrobe and red slippers and regarded them curiously.

"Doctor Norman Brenner?"

"Yes."

"We are coming in," said Oakley. They entered the room of the man for whom the Los Angeles police were searching at that very moment. Oakley bolted the door.

Doctor Norman Brenner looked amazed, then indignant, then troubled. "What do you want?"

"Information," Oakley said crisply. "I'm a private detective. You'll be wise to answer my questions. Need I add that

the case involves murder and you're suspected?"

"What nonsense is this?" Brenner exclaimed.

OAKLEY gestured to Cherry, who sat down, crossed exquisite legs, and poised a needle-pointed pencil above her stenographer's notebook. Oakley signaled Brenner to a chair, leaned close and proffered the small slip of paper on which the name and location of the hotel was written. "Ever see that before?"

"Yes. It's my writing."

Cherry's pencil made hieroglyphs in her notebook as the words were uttered.

"You gave that slip to Faith Lee?"

"Yes. Look here! Why the devil are you—"

"Don't ask questions!" Oakley snapped. "Answer them! You are on what is commonly called a spot, Doctor Brenner. Very shortly a bull named McClane is going to grab you, and you'll find it an unpleasant experience. If you want a square deal, talk now—tell me where I can find Faith Lee, and why you killed two men named Brooks and Anderson."

Brenner swallowed. "Why, I— I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Surely," Oakley pressed, "you read the papers. You know of the deaths of Anderson and Brooks—that both bodies were found in trunks bearing your initials."

"My trunks? You mean Miss Kent's chauffeur and Faith's director? Newspapers? I haven't looked at one since I came up here!"

Oakley sat back. "This," he opined, "is going to be difficult, for you as well as for me. I tell you frankly, I've got to turn up a murderer in a hurry in order to save myself from the very unpleasant legal consequences of a rash act. I'm going to do it, no matter who gets the chair. You're going to talk!"

"Talk? You've startled me so that I can hardly think," Doctor Brenner exclaimed in dismay.

"The less thinking and the more remembering you do, the better!" Oakley snapped. "Now, answer my questions. What time did you leave your home on the night of the tenth?"

"I'm not sure of the exact time. I finished work at the lab, drove home, had dinner, went to my room and lay down. I was very tired, and unintentionally fell asleep. When I awoke, I packed, and left."

"When?"

"It was past ten."

"What you are saying," Oakley stated, "is that you were asleep at the time the murders were evidently committed. That, I must point out, is no alibi at all."

"It's the truth!"

"You drove straight here?"

"Certainly."

"You took an uncommonly long time about it."

"I'm a very slow and cautious driver."

"An ordinary driver would have reached here in half the time you took."

"Perhaps, but I came directly."

"You gave that slip, with the address of this hotel on it, to Faith Lee before you left?"

"Yes, late that afternoon."

"Why?"

"So she could get in touch with me, if necessary."

"Where was she when you left the house?"

"In her bedroom, I suppose."

"You suppose?"

"I spoke through the door, to say good-bye, but there was no answer and I assumed she was sleeping."

"You didn't telephone an express company? You didn't go to your laboratory

on the campus of St. Vincent College after you left the house?"

"No."

OAKLEY said firmly: "Doctor Brenner, I'm forced to the conclusion that either you're entirely innocent of what happened, or you're lying with amazing facility."

"I'm telling the truth!"

"You would say so in any case," Oakley went on relentlessly. "The big point is this. The man who committed these murders was seen leaving Miss Lee's house, after dark, on the night of the tenth, carrying Miss Lee, apparently unconscious, in his arms. He drove directly to your biological laboratory and went in—"

"That's impossible!" Doctor Brenner blurted. "I'm the only person who has keys to that laboratory."

"There are no others in existence?"

"None! I always carry them in my vest pocket. Here they are." He lifted two flat keys from his vest pocket, each a duplicate of the other. Oakley took them.

"These keys were on your person when you lay down after dinner?"

"Yes."

"They were still there when you awoke?"

"Yes."

Oakley sighed. "I shouldn't like to face McClane, if I were you, with a story as weak as that. Now, listen. I want to know the exact nature of your secret experiments in the biological laboratory."

"My experiments," said Doctor Norman Brenner, "are devoted to restoring the dead to life."

Oakley sat up. Cherry Morris' pencil paused. They glanced at each other, as though doubting the man's sanity. Doctor Brenner merely looked at them.

"You mean to tell me," Oakley asked

him, "that a conservative college, and the CWA, have advanced funds to you for experiments in resurrecting the dead?"

"I do." Doctor Brenner's eyes lighted. "It may sound fantastic to you. As a matter of fact, there is nothing startling about it. I have succeeded several times in restoring dead bodies to life."

"Humans?" Oakley blurted.

"No. In my experiments I have used dogs, cats and rabbits."

Oakley took a breath and said: "Please explain."

"Certainly. I am not the only man working on these experiments. You may have read of those conducted by Doctor Robert Cornish, who was once a member of the staff of the University of California's Institute of Experimental Biology. He was conducting his experiments until recently in a building on the university campus. The publicity given his work led to his being asked to remove himself. I have maintained strict secrecy about my own work in order to proceed unmolested."

"Hmmm!"

"Doctor Cornish and I both use teeterboards for simulating the circulation of blood once the dead heart begins functioning again. A solution—saturated with oxygen, containing the heart stimulant adrenalin and the liver extract heparin, and some blood from which the coagulating substance, fibrin, has been removed—is introduced into the circulatory system through the thigh vein—"

"The thigh vein?" Oakley repeated.

"Yes. Circulation is then restored by rocking the dead body on the teeterboard, massaging it, and blowing into the mouth to stimulate respiration.

"My experiments," Doctor Brenner continued, "are based on groundwork done by Doctor George Washington Crile, of Cleveland, thirty years ago, and also on experiments conducted at the

Mayo Clinic in twenty-nine. Doctor Albert Solomon Hyman, of the Witkin Foundation for the Study and Prevention of Heart Disease, in Manhattan, developed another method which I adopted—that of prodding the dead heart into action by electric impulses. In this case a resuscitation apparatus called a hymenator is used. A hollow, gold-plated needle is thrust into the right auricle of the heart—"

Oakley swallowed. "What!"

"And through the bore of the needle an insulated electric wire is inserted to complete the circuit. A generator supplies the current, and in six cases out of ten the heart action starts again, if it has not been suspended for more than twelve minutes."

OAKLEY asked pointedly: "And this method has never been used on humans?"

"Doctor Cornish," said Brenner, "tried last year to revive a man who was dead five hours of heart disease—using oxygen and the teeterboard, but no injection—and failed. I determined not to attempt to resurrect humans until the technique of bringing lower animals back to life is perfected, for an excellent reason—"

"Which is?"

"When blood stops flowing through the brain for even a short time, a chemical change takes place in the brain cells. The animals I revived are living in a coma as a result of this action. Months or years may pass before the mental facilities are completely restored to normal. A human revived after an hour of death might live an idiot, or go mad, or exist in a coma. Until that difficulty can be overcome in some way—"

"You have no associates in your experiments?"

"I have had several, none now. I've explained the technique to a number of

persons, swearing them to secrecy about the work. I have personally, of course, conducted every experiment in the laboratory, and have taken care that no one else ever touched my apparatus."

"You have," Oakley insisted, "never attempted to resurrect a dead human?"

"Never. Yet, naturally, I do not intend to devote my life to resurrecting dead mongrels. My great aim is to be enabled to bring life back to men and women who have died of hemorrhage, shock, asphyxiation, and heart paralysis. Then—" the scientist's eyes gleamed brilliantly—"then I will have achieved one of the most astounding miracles of modern science!"

Oakley studied the intense gleam in the doctor's eyes—and shivered. "One more question, Doctor Brenner. Did you kill Anderson and Brooks?"

"Certainly not!"

"Very well, then. Did you attempt to restore them to life after they had been killed?"

"No!"

Oakley sighed and signaled Cherry Morris to transcribe no more of the conversation. "Listen to me, Doctor Brenner. I want you to stay here—here, in this room, from now on. Don't go out. Don't telephone. Have your meals brought up. Watch yourself. And, in case you're found here by the police—you haven't seen me. Understand that?"

"Yes, but—"

"That's all."

Oakley strode out, thrusting into his pocket the keys of Doctor Brenner's laboratory.

CHAPTER SIX

Trunk Number Three

OAKLEY stopped his roadster near the biological research laboratory on the campus of St. Vincent College. Cherry

accompanied him to the big door. The pungent smell of charred wood was in the air, but no one was about. After a precautionary moment of listening, Oakley slid a key into the lock.

White light splashed upon him as another car drew up behind the roadster. The long Brixey unfolded from it, and walked with another man across gritting gravel. "That you, Oke? I started as soon as you phoned, got Mr. Sandwell, and here we are."

Sidney Sandwell asked anxiously: "Have you no word from Faith?"

"None, unfortunately," Oakley answered, turning the key. "I want you here because this is the first real lead we've found, pointing to what may have happened to her."

Brixey gasped: "Where what?"

Oakley stepped in and thumbed a light switch. Gleaming bulbs glared down upon strange apparatus. He noted the teeterboard mentioned by Doctor Brenner, bent glass tubes supported by clamps on standards, electrical meters, a handbellows attached to a cup-shaped rubber inhalator like a small gas-mask.

"Observe," Oakley invited, "the devices used to bring the dead back to life."

His continued tour of the laboratory brought him to a huge white enameled case in one corner. He opened one door and felt stinging cold flow out—cold that bit to the very bones of the hand he inserted into the interior. In racked test-tubes, inside, rested cultures of bacilli and jars containing animal tissues in alcohol. His eyes glinted as he shut the queer refrigerator and went on.

A door on the opposite side of the laboratory opened into a hallway which connected with adjoining rooms. Oakley, leading the procession, discovered two wire cages containing mongrels who gazed about stupidly, as if drunk.

"And observe," Oakley said, "cadavers

returned to life by the magic of science."

Gazing intently at Sidney Sandwell, he asked, "Have you ever had reason to doubt your step-son's sanity?"

"That—that's a most difficult question to answer!"

"Would you," Oakley pressed, "consider him capable of deliberately killing humans in order to provide himself with specimens for his experiments in resurrection?"

"Good God!" Sandwell blurted. "You can't suspect him of that!"

"I," Oakley retorted, "can suspect anyone of anything without half trying. I asked you that last question because it seems very likely, though not certain, that Doctor Brenner has done exactly that."

"Killed—killed humans in order to revive them?"

OAKLEY'S eyes glittered. "Think about it! For years Doctor Brenner has worked on these secret experiments. He has successfully revived lower animals. His technique may be advanced farther than he admits. His great aim has been to perfect it so that in certain cases humans may be revived from death. For his most important experiments he would need human subjects, would he not?"

"Corpses," Oakley continued, while Brixey stared and Cherry Morris shuddered, "not too long dead. Dead, in fact, only a few minutes. Obviously, such cadavers are rarely available for scientific experiments. The only solution of the problem of supply is— Doctor Brenner must make his own corpses."

"See the logic of it!" Oakley went on firmly. "Assume that Brenner's technique is perfected, that human subjects are necessary, that they must be newly dead. He would reason that, if the dead is returned to life immediately, killing a subject is not murder. If he conducted

his ghastly experiment on someone to whom he was dear, he could enlist that person's promise of secrecy after the resurrection, and so escape all legal consequences."

"You mean—Faith!" Sandwell ejaculated hoarsely. "You think he did that horrible thing to her!"

"But, I say, Oke!" Brixey protested. "That leaves out Anderson and Brooks completely!"

"Not," Oakley answered, "if they threatened to interrupt the experiment when every moment was precious, not if they had to be put out of the way in order for it to proceed."

"God!" Sandwell exclaimed again. "Those marks on the bodies of Anderson and Brooks—the fact that they were not clothed—Norman showed me several times the incisions he made, the needle he used—Good heavens, the man must be stark mad!"

"And in that case," Oakley went on grimly, "Miss Faith Lee—"

Heavy steps, gritting in the gravel outside, interrupted. Hard knuckles beat the door. The knob rattled and a voice howled through: "Open up!"

Oakley moaned as the fists slammed at the panels again. He said, resignedly: "Open the door, Archie, before it bursts into splinters. It's our pal, Lieutenant McClane."

"Open up!" McClane's voice bellowed again. "I know you're in there, Oakley!"

Cherry Morris looked terrified as Brixey drew the latch of the door and was overwhelmed by the lumbering entrance of the big plainclothesman. A uniformed squad-car man followed him in.

McClane charged at Oakley, and exploded: "How'd you get in here?"

Oakley sighed. "With keys, McClane."

"Where'd you get those keys?"

"I decline to answer," Oakley said. "On the ground that it might incriminate me."

"You can keep your trap shut and you're still plenty incriminated!" McClane stormed. "Only one guy had keys to this lab, and that's Brenner. You got 'em from him. You know where he is. That's one more count against you. Oakley, you're under arrest!"

"I can find no flaw in your logic, McClane," Oakley retorted. "But logic isn't a warrant."

"This is!"

McClane flipped a folded document beneath Oakley's nose. Cherry Morris lowered herself into a chair. Brixey scowled and stepped forward pugnaciously. Oakley inspected the warrant.

"Very well," he sighed. "I'm under arrest. You've got me, McClane."

"Ho!" boomed McClane triumphantly. "All right, wisacre. Where's Brenner?"

"That," Oakley countered, "I'll keep to myself a while. I don't want him swooped down upon by a horde of your carnivorous cops. In the interests of my client, I must talk with him. I'll send Archie."

"You will not! All three of you are under arrest! You're all going to stick with me! How do you like that?"

"Not at all." Oakley's eyes grew dangerously bright. "Don't get ugly, McClane. And don't be a fool. You want a murderer. Play ball with me and you'll get him."

McCLANE frowned suspiciously. "Your word of honor, that you'll bring Brenner right here—right now? I'll take a chance on that—hoping you don't keep your promise. Because if you don't, we'll get Brenner anyway, and that'll be one more charge against you."

Grimly Oakley took the arm of Sidney Sandwell, and drew the man aside. He spoke softly, so that the glaring McClane could not hear. "You'll find Brenner at La Hacienda at Arrowhead. Drive up there as fast as you can go, get him, and bring him right back."

"Yes!" said Sandwell. "Yes!"

Oakley conducted him to the door. The second car outside spurted away, Sandwell in it, as McClane tugged Oakley back. He demanded the keys of the lab and got them. Oakley gestured him aside, went to the telephone in the corner and called long distance. He asked for a connection with La Hacienda at Arrowhead.

"Connect me with Doctor Brenner," he requested of the hotel operator.

"I'm sorry, sir, Doctor Brenner is no longer here. He checked out a little while ago."

Oakley swallowed. He pushed the phone away, peered at McClane and asked: "If, by any chance, I don't produce Doctor Brenner?"

"It'll be just too bad for you, shamus! Because we've got all the dope we need on Brenner—see? I made the president of this college talk. I know what the marks on those bodies mean. Which," McClane added ominously, "will make it just that much tougher for you if Brenner doesn't show up!"

"I can see that." Oakley stepped closer. "McClane, I came here for a reason. I want proof of the murderer as much as you do—in fact, far more. I'm going to get it. Howl all you damned please, but I'm going to search this building from top to bottom."

He morosely signaled Brixey and Cherry Morris to follow, went into the connecting hallway, to the door opening into the lower room. McClane and the squad-car cop tramped after them as they went down the steps. Oakley searched for a light switch. He found one, clicked it, but no light came.

"Bulb must be burned out," he said. "Got a torch?"

A flashlight in the hand of the patrolman shot a beam ahead. Oakley stepped into a cement-walled, windowless, under-

ground room. The beam of the torch showed heavy racks loaded with discarded apparatus, bundled records—and a single large trunk.

Oakley paused peering at the trunk.

McClane said, "Hello!" and tramped to it. A solid thump sounded. McClane looked around curiously.

Brixey gestured. "It came from up there." Cherry Morris added: "Somebody at the door." McClane grunted "Huh!" and Oakley trod to the base of the steps.

"The door," he said, "is closed."

OAKLEY climbed the flight, pushed at the door, looked startled, and pushed again. It was set immovably in its frame. He stooped, squinted through the keyhole, and saw a key being withdrawn. It vanished.

"It's not only closed," he said quietly, straightening. "It's locked. Somebody's shut us in here."

McClane tramped up, shouldered against the door and paused, hearing quick footfalls on the floor beyond. Someone, it was evident, was moving about the laboratory. McClane beat his fists on the panels and bellowed: "Let us out! Open this door!"

The answer was silence.

They went back down. The torchlight sought out a wooden box in one corner, disclosing inside it odds and ends—an old tire-pump, a pair of pliers, a hank of insulated wire, and a flat tool for removing automobile shoes from wheel rims.

"That," Oakley said, "might do it."

McClane thrust the implement toward the man with the torch. "Get busy, Fisher! Break the bolt on that door. I'm going—"

A soft grinding sound silenced him. It was coming from above. The torch in Fisher's hand swung upward to joists and

floor-boards. The cutting noise vibrated through the wood. Then, in the gleam of light, a point of metal shone as it pierced.

"What the hell?" McClane blurted.

"A bit," Oakley said.

"Hey!" McClane bellowed upward. "Let us out of here! Open that door!"

"I suspect," Oakley said, "your noise is quite useless."

Again, as he spoke, the sharp point spiraled through the wood; again the bit pushed through and was withdrawn. Without a moment's delay the grinding sound came once more.

McClane's police positive flashed in the light and raised. Oakley's hand gripped it. "Bullets won't drive that man back to unlock that door," he pointed out, "and they might wipe out the possibility of a very necessary confession."

A third time the bit pierced.

"Standing and staring will do us no good," Oakley stated. "That trunk interests me."

He strode to it. McClane grunted again and shoved him aside. The big detective stooped to pull it away from the wall: it was heavy. He snatched the tire-iron from Fisher's hand and tackled the closed lock. While metal squeaked under the levered power of McClane's huge muscles, the revolving bit again drove through the ceiling, at a point a foot removed from the first row of three holes.

Oakley watched McClane as Cherry Morris' hand stole into his. Brixey adjusted his monocle. McClane heaved, broke the lock, and quickly unclasped the fasteners. The lid swung up. The light of the torch probed deep into the trunk.

An involuntary gasp came from McClane. Oakley's eyes narrowed.

Clad only in a pink slip, her bare knees drawn up—dead, obviously dead—lay the body of a beautiful girl.

"Too bad," Oakley said softly. "Faith Lee."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The White Doom

McCLANE snapped erect. "By God, that clinches it! Right here beneath the lab! Look at those marks on her. A cut on the thigh, the same as the others! Fisher, get at that door! Crack it open!"

For a moment there was no sound save the quickened breathing of those around the trunk, then Fisher bounded up the stairs with the tire-iron. From the door came the sharp creaking of metal as Fisher pried the tool.

"Notice," said Oakley quietly, "that the condition of this corpse is not quite the same as the two others. The hands and feet of this girl show no signs of having been frozen."

"What of it?" McClane demanded. "She's dead—murdered! Brenner killed her! What the double hell is going on up there?"

The light was now in McClane's hand; he swung it toward the ceiling as a fast, rasping sound echoed in the cellar. The bit had rapidly bored out a square pattern. Now the thin blade of a saw was biting from one cluster of holes toward another.

McClane blurted: "I'll get that door open!"

He legged up the steps, shouldered Fisher aside and tackled the crack of the door with the sharp-pointed tool. The edge was scarred and dented, but the frame had not budged. Oakley watched the saw cutting through a third side of the square, and closed the lid of the trunk.

"Murder?" he murmured. "In this case, perhaps not."

"Oke, I don't care how many murders have been committed, or who did them!" Cherry Morris blurted. "McClane's got you—he's going to take a fiendish delight in destroying you."

Oakley seemed not to hear. "Perhaps," he repeated thoughtfully, "not murder. . ."

A crash sounded above. A section of flooring, less than a foot square, split downward and fell into the darkness. A shoe was visible, rapidly withdrawing. Then swiftly, something white and solid tumbled through the opening and thumped to the cement below.

"What the devil is that?" Brixey exclaimed.

McClane lumbered down the steps and stared. His light played upon the block of white. It was colorless as snow; white fumes were drifting from it, flowing viscidly over the floor.

He ducked away as another block of white spilled down from the opening. Spattering fragments flew from it as it struck. Through the aperture a third and fourth block tumbled—a fifth, a sixth. Then quickly, the opening in the floor was covered.

"What in hell is that stuff?" McClane blurted.

"Nothing so strange," Oakley answered quickly. "Archie, a lift! Make it snappy!"

There came the sound of something heavy being rolled on casters to a point directly above. It stopped suddenly.

Oakley spun Brixey to a position beneath the now covered hole. He eeled himself to Brixey's shoulders, reached for the linoleum that had been drawn above the hole, and pushed hard. It bulged an inch and met a heavy obstruction. He dropped breathless, snatched the torch from McClane's hand, and turned it upon the fuming bricks.

"Dry ice," he said.

"You mean the stuff that's used to pack ice cream?" McClane demanded. "What the devil was it thrown down here for?"

"For the purpose," Oakley said, "of murder. We may now stand back and contemplate death by suffocation—all of us."

"Oke!" Cherry Morris cried.

"This is no time for wise cracks!" McClane stormed. "How can that stuff kill us? And if it can—"

Footfalls were moving rapidly across the floor above. A click sounded, as if the laboratory lights had been switched out. Then silence.

"The man up there," Oakley said quietly, "is our murderer."

McCLANE whirled. "Keep at that door Fisher! Burst that lock!" and as the staring squad-car man whirled up the steps: "What're you talking about—suffocation? That stuff—"

"Dry ice," Oakley explained, staring at the fuming white blocks, "is solidified carbon dioxide. Carbon dioxide will not support life. You see it now turning from solid to gas. The gas given off is many times the volume of the solid. There's enough of that stuff here to fill this entire cellar—and no way of getting either ourselves or it out, except possibly—"

"Is that straight?" McClane swallowed.

"Watch!" said Oakley. He brought his cigarette lighter from his pocket and flicked it to flame. Then he lowered it to the floor and slowly brought it close to a fuming block. The flame blinked out. "Breathing that stuff will put us out not quite so quickly, but just as effectively."

Cherry Morris was standing with parted lips, watching Oakley's grim face. McClane turned a shade paler. "You mean to say," he blurted, "that that gas is going to keep coming off—that there's no way to stop it—and it'll choke us to death?"

"Exactly," Oakley answered, "as it choked Anderson and Brooks to death. This room is air-tight. Very shortly we'll begin to suffocate—if we don't get out of here."

McClane peered grimly at the ceiling and pointed his gun. "I'll get that guy!"

"Which won't help us a particle. Newspapers might," Oakley suggested. "Cloth—anything. Look around!" He snatched

the light from McClane and swung the beam upon the shelves, found one of the bundles of records to be thickly packed blueprints. He whipped the paper out, approached one of the steaming blocks.

"Don't touch the stuff with bare hands," he warned. "Its temperature is a hundred and nine degrees below zero, centigrade. It'll freeze your fingers in a flash."

"That's what happened to the feet and hands of Anderson and Brooks, then!" McClane blurted.

"But not," Oakley said, rising, "to Miss Lee."

Protecting his hands by the thick paper, he held one of the fuming white blocks. Quickly he carried it up the steps. Fisher was prying frantically at the solid door, sweating, mumbling curses. Oakley shouldered him aside, and pressed the white block hard against the door under the knob.

The air was thickening. The fuming block in Oakley's paper-covered hands was growing perceptibly smaller, its corners blunting, as it diminished. The intense cold bit through the paper into his fingers, but he continued to press the block hard against the metal.

"Get the hell away, Oakley!" McClane snapped. "We've got to break out of here!"

"We'll never get out of here using that tire-iron alone," Oakley answered grimly. "Perhaps you know, McClane, but probably you don't, that intense cold makes metal brittle. When the bolt of the lock gets thoroughly chilled—who can tell? In the meantime, everybody stay on the steps. The gas is coming up like water."

Charmaine Morris was breathing heavily. Brixey looked anguished. Listening, Oakley heard footfalls again through the floor; someone was moving about the laboratory. He said: "Hold that tire-iron ready for some quick work—but we've got to wait a little longer."

"God—that stuff!" McClane choked.

Oakley pressed harder, fingers numbed. "Our man," he said, "is waiting to make sure no one comes to liberate us before the gas lays us low. He got the stuff from the germ-culture refrigerator in the lab just as he did when he killed Anderson and Brooks."

McClane gasped: "Hurry it up!"

OAKLEY smiled wryly. "Does it mean anything to you, McClane, that no part of Faith Lee's body was frozen, as the others were, by this damnably cold stuff? Does it mean anything to you that there is no blueness on her skin?"

McClane blurted: "Let me get at that door!"

"Trying to break out before the bolt becomes brittle would be a waste of time," Oakley pointed out dryly.

Clustered on the stairs, the five breathed laboriously. The atmosphere was taking on a heavy deadliness. Foggy white fumes floated higher above the floor; mist streamed from the block clamped against the door by Oakley's numbed hands.

"Those details about Miss Lee," Oakley's voice came quietly, "mean that she was not murdered, and that she did not die of asphyxiation."

"Never mind that now!"

"She died," Oakley persisted, "of simple heart failure. All the facts point to it—no clothes missing from her home, for instance. An autopsy will prove it. Follow it through, McClane. There's only one possible explanation."

"You tell me!" McClane sneered, "while I choke to death!"

"I'll tell you," Oakley answered levelly, "while you gamble on the only chance you've got of living. The man who later killed Anderson and Brooks brought Faith Lee here in a desperate attempt to resurrect her."

"Brenner, sure! Stark crazy and grabbing at a chance to experiment!"

Oakley continued imperturbably: "That man was seen carrying the girl out of Miss Lee's home by Anderson and Brooks. They followed him here. He was in the laboratory, preparing to resurrect the girl, when they interrupted. Picture it! A man frantically anxious to restore a dead girl to life, faced with intolerable delay at the hands of men who could not understand what he was doing."

McClane's chest was heaving heavily, but he was listening.

"Every second was precious. There was no time to argue. The desperate man solved the situation by knocking Brooks and Anderson out. Then free of interruptions, he made the attempt to resurrect the dead girl. But he failed."

"For God's sake, we've got to get that door open!" Fisher coughed.

"In a moment. . . That man had not killed Miss Lee, but he realized that removing and mutilating her body would mean grave consequences. In order to save himself he had to eliminate the two witnesses to his deed. He dragged Anderson and Brooks into the closets, tossed chunks of dry ice in with them, and closed them in. They were lying on the floor; the stuff froze parts of their bodies and suffocated them."

"The door, Oke!" Brixey urged.

Oakley persisted grimly. "He then found it necessary to dispose of the bodies. He hid Miss Lee in the trunk down here. There being no other way, he carried the bodies of Anderson and Brooks to the Lee home and put them in the other trunks. The rest—"

Oakley stepped back with a gasp. He dropped the diminished chunk of dry ice, and it fell splitting on the cement below. "The tire-iron!" He pried its point deep into the crack and bore back. McClane

grabbed his wrists and added poundage to the pull.

In the laboratory quick steps sounded. Heels beat across the floor and stopped as the gritting of tires in the gravel outside carried faintly through the chilled door. Again there were footfalls and the click of a light switch.

Crack! Brittle metal snapped. Oakley heaved out the door. McClane charged past him, slammed into the laboratory and pulled out his gun. Oakley came close behind to see the weapon leveled at the middle of a frightened, pale, cowed man of middle age—Doctor Norman Brenner.

"Got you!" McClane roared.

OAKLEY glanced once to see that Cherry Morris was safe, and signaled Brixey to the outer door. He ignored McClane's bellow and stepped between the gun and Brenner.

"I told you to stay at Arrowhead!"

"I—I couldn't!" the scientist protested. "When I realized my position fully, I couldn't let myself remain a fugitive. I've come back because I'm not afraid of facing this charge. I'm innocent."

"Tell that," McClane growled, "to the jury! They won't believe it any more than I do!"

Oakley turned. "When you hear it, McClane, you'll decide that Brenner's alibi is one of the weakest you ever heard. It's so absolutely weak I believed it implicitly."

"You what?"

"I believe the man," Oakley insisted. "He's not our murderer."

He left McClane staring incredulously, and circled the room, gazing at the floor. Bits of sawdust were sprinkled over it, carried by the feet of the man who had cut the hole through the floor. Oakley paused outside a closet door, listened intently, and turned his back to it.

"You're screwy!" McClane declared.

"This guy came here and tried to suffocate us to death and you think maybe he was just having a little fun!"

Doctor Brenner faltered: "I—I stepped into this laboratory only a moment ago. I know nothing—"

"Aw, nuts!" McClane snarled.

"Wait, McClane!" Oakley interrupted. "Doctor Brenner, I have a question. Would you, under any circumstances, even if the deceased were very dear to you, attempt at the present stage of your experiments to resurrect a human being?"

"Certainly not!" the scientist exclaimed. "I've already told you why! The effect on the brain cells—"

"It's no good, McClane," Oakley declared. "He didn't do it."

"Then who did?"

"The gentleman who was prevented from leaving this laboratory by Doctor Brenner's entrance a moment ago," Oakley answered. "The gentleman hiding in this closet!"

He whirled, snatching at the knob of the door behind him, flashing it open. Instantly swift movement came out. The heavy base of a Bunsen-burner stand, gripped by its upright, slashed at Oakley's head. He ducked aside, his up-thrown arm numbed by the savage blow, as a dark figure leaped past.

"Grab him, Archie!"

Brixey's long frame dived at the man dashing toward the outer door. His lean arms encircled the man's waist. Oakley, spinning again, grabbed the burner stand and jerked it out of a desperately clenched hand. He clicked hard knuckles to the point of a lifted chin. A groan sounded, and Brixey found himself supporting a sagging form.

OAKLEY grabbed the captive, slung him into a chair, whipped out an automatic, and said: "We've met Mr. Sandwell before, I believe."

Sidney Sandwell crouched, gripping the chair, glaring up at Oakley.

"So you didn't go after Brenner?" the investigator asked breathlessly. "You were afraid of what we might learn here. Just as you were when you attempted to set fire to the place to destroy evidence and get us away. You stayed and watched. You trapped us in the cellar and tried—"

"You can't prove that!" Sandwell gasped.

"On the contrary," Oakley asserted, while McClane stared and Brixey blocked the way to the door. "Your fingers look burned. Actually they're frost-bitten by the dry ice you heaved down on us. You tracked sawdust from the ice packing into the closet when you hid."

He grabbed Sandwell's ankle, swung the foot upward, peeled down the trouser cuff—and more bits of fresh sawdust sifted out.

McClane said: "For God's sake, Oakley!"

"Fill out the picture yourself—you'll get a confession from him," Oakley promised. "He'll tell you that he saw Faith Lee die of a heart attack. He'll tell you he made a desperate attempt to revive her—made it himself because he knew Doctor Brenner would refuse to do it. He'd had medical training. He's already admitted to me he saw the technique of resurrection demonstrated to him.

"He'll tell you he took the keys of this lab out of the doctor's pocket while Brenner was sleeping, and later returned them. He'll tell you he marked the corpses of Anderson and Brooks in order to throw suspicion on Brenner. He'll—"

Sandwell snarled: "I wasn't even in town that night! I was in Yuma—I telephoned you from there! I can prove it!"

"True," Oakley admitted, "but you left for Yuma, immediately after putting the two bodies in the trunks, as part of a plan to establish an alibi. You used me as a

tool toward that end. It's no use, Sandwell—you're got!"

Defiance flared in Sandwell's eyes—defiance already fading before the inevitability of established guilt. McClane fastened heavy hands upon him, and he winced. Oakley pocketed his automatic.

"A queer thing, McClane. Sandwell's one dominating purpose at the beginning was quite the opposite of murder—it was to bring a dead body back to life. Why was he so desperate to do it? Because his living daughter meant big money to him; his dead daughter meant poverty. I leave him to you."

McClane blinked amazement.

"If there's another point still worrying you, about Anderson's car being in Miss Kent's garage, McClane," Oakley added, "that's very simple. The murderer used it when he disposed of the bodies, left it in the garage where it belonged, and returned to his own. He may deny it, but that's the only way it could have happened, you see, because only Anderson and Brooks were witnesses to the episode of the attempted resurrection that night."

McClane gulped. "I guess so! That doesn't matter now anyway!"

Smiling, Oakley removed from his pocket a yellow slip of paper and pushed it into Sandwell's hands. "That," he said, "is the check you gave me."

He slipped a folded document from McClane's coat pocket, tore it to bits, tossed them away. "That," he said, "is your warrant. McClane, I bid you good-night. Come, Cherry. Come Archie."

McClane gaped as they walked out.

Oakley slid behind the wheel of his roadster. Brixey angled down at the far side and meditatively adjusted his monocle. Charmaine Morris nestled between them, her arm curled through Oakley's.

"Cherry, darling," he sighed contentedly, "make a note to send Claire Kent a bill for five thousand dollars in the morning."



Nick kicked out—and the revolver exploded.

RACE RACKET

by
Russ Meservey

The greyhounds were whimpering in their kennels that afternoon, for a dog and his handler had died in the gamblers' paradise that bordered the Flagler Track. Died just in time to turn a fifty-grand, three-race wager into a murder bet!

NICK SLATE'S lean, Florida tanned-face bore a pleasant wistful smile. He placed his hand on the dog in the stall and spoke softly. "Well, Tinpan, you gonna fetch that sharp nose of you. a first tonight? You gonna win for Mr. Jackwall, that gambler, again?"

The greyhound whimpered, nuzzled the cage-door wire with a nose that was hot against Slate's scrawny fingers. One of the Flagler Street track attendants came into the dog house with another hound. The dog was barking, but the barking stopped, became a low whimper like Tin-

pan's as they entered. As the door opened and shut, Slate could see Harry Jackwall's well built figure hurrying away. Jackwall had been loitering outside when Slate had entered.

"Evenin', Nick," the red-coated attendant called and put the greyhound in a stall.

"Evenin', Joe," Slate answered. "Say, what's makin' these hounds whine, Joe? They act nervous an' scared."

"You-all quit that whimperin', Fly-back," Joe said to the dog and closed the stall gate, locking it. "Don't know, Nick, lest it's a storm comin' up. That whimpers 'em sometimes." He came along the line of stalls toward Slate, looking into the cages. "Pooches ain't all in yet, Nick. What time is—"

He stopped three stalls from Nick Slate, finished the "—it?" with a sharply indrawn breath, bent down quickly and cried in a strangled voice, "Good God, look! Nick! Look!"

Nick Slate took two long strides, stood crouched, staring into the stall. The wistful smile faded from his lean face.

"God!" Joe exclaimed. "He's—dead!"

Inside the wall stall, jammed into the dog-sized cage, the twisted body of a small man knelt, head toward the door, as though in prayer. The handle of a knife-hilt-deep between his narrow shoulders, made a brown bulls-eye in a drying circle of red staining the faded denim shirt.

Slate stopped shaking the door. He growled: "Who owns the dog that's supposed to be in this stall, Joe?"

"Number Seven," Joe answered grimly. "Fellow named Owen. He's a new owner from St. Petersburg."

Slate got up from his crouched position, glanced keenly around the half-gloom of the dog house. "Charles Owen," he said to Joe in a low voice. "I saw his name on the board. Never raced at Miami before that I know of, but his hound's supposed to have a record in the quarter

mile. Fu Manchu's the pup's name." Slate spoke as though reciting a lesson he had learned, but his eyes kept darting up and down the length of the building.

THE dog stalls lined both sides of the house in two tiers. The dead man was in a lower stall. The steel mesh over the door frames covered an area about two feet high and one foot wide, and was too closely woven to permit a hand being reached inside. The rest of the stalls were of solid wood, with an automatic spring lock on each door.

"Get this Charley Owen," Nick directed tersely. "And Richardson, the track manager. Bring 'em here, and a cop, too, but don't talk to anybody else, Joe. The first race starts in about fifty minutes, an' this'll have to be cleaned up before then or th' dogs won't run. Tell Sam Wren to keep people out of here. Hold the pups outside."

"O. K., Nick," Joe agreed quickly.

The Flagler Street track detective studied the floor of the dog house near the death stall. There were no bloodstains. Either the dead man had been hit on the head and stabbed to death after he had been jammed into the dog stall, or he had been murdered somewhere outside and carried in. There was no telling until his identity was discovered. Slate had no key to the locked stall.

The greyhounds in the other stalls continued their whimpering. A dog barked outside. Slate stood with his back against the door of Stall 7, leaned there, blocking a view of the grisly sight behind him, watching the entrance to the kennels.

Another red-coated handler came in with a white hound, and behind him a short, fat man with a reddish, round face entered, puffing.

"Joe says you wanted to see Mr. Owen, Nick," the handler called. "I've got to park this pooch in here for the first race."

"I'm Charley Owen," the short, fat man stated. "How's my dog?" He eyed Slate as he advanced. "You're not a handler, are you. I guess you must be an owner. I know dogs, mister. I've got fifteen of the fastest racers in Florida. Wait until you see my Fu Manchu run!"

"I'm Nick Slate," Slate said curtly. "Track detective." He made no move to move away from in front of Stall 7. "Did you bring your dog in here yourself, or did somebody else—"

"Hell, no!" Owen scoffed with a wide grin. "I'm no small-timer. I've got fifteen pooches, I'm telling you." He looked around, called: "Hey, you, Ribs! Ribs! Where'n hell's Ribs gone now? Damn it, I told him not to leave Fu alone. Not for a minute!"

Slate asked: "Ever hear hounds whimper like these dogs are now, Mr. Owen?"

"I don't worry about other peoples' dogs," the fat man said. He came close to Slate. "Get away from that kennel door, feller. You're shutting air out from my racer. I know some of those tricks myself. You can't fool me. And you don't hear Fu whimpering!"

"No-oo," Slate agreed softly and stepped away from the stall door.

Owen took keys from his pocket, squatted, a key poised in front of the lock of Stall 7. He said, "Now, Fu," with a throaty chuckle. "Now—" and went suddenly to his knees, began swearing.

"All right," Slate ordered. "Unlock the door and we'll both see how dead he is!"

Pivoting on his knees, the fat man cried: "You—killed him! By God! You—" His right hand dove into his hip pocket, jerked out holding a stubby automatic. "You killed Ribs, you—"

Nick Slate kicked his right foot out and up. The toe of his shoe hit Owen's right wrist. The revolver exploded once. Its blast sounded like a cannon.

Slate took four steps along the stalls, picked up the gun he had kicked out of Owen's hand. He came back, stood over the fat man. "You'll scare hell out of the hounds, Owen, and get yourself in a jam, shooting guns off around here!"

Owen got to his feet. He was trembling. His fat lips moved, but for a minute no words came from his mouth. His eyes were narrowed, showing only brown irises and black pupils.

Fingering the gun, Slate said irritably: "Well, you didn't use a knife on me, but it was a knife that—" He ripped the keys from Owen's left hand, stooped, unlocked the stall door, swung it open.

Reaching inside, he touched the body, felt a cold, bare, slim forearm; moved a cold finger of a thin hand not yet stiffened. He started to drag at the arm, stopped, backed away from the stall.

"Have to leave him in there until the cops move him," he said. "You called him Ribs. What was his name?"

"Jeff Ribbon," Owen answered with an effort. "He's my trainer."

"He was your trainer. Ribbon, eh? Funny name."

The whining of the greyhounds kept up. The door at the end of the kennel opened. A bulky policeman came in, followed by Joe and a tall, handsome man in a light gray suit.

"I—I'm sorry I lost my temper," Owen said. "It was a shock."

Slate pocketed the stubby automatic and waited while the cop and Joe and Richardson, the track manager, walked up to them. He motioned into the dog stall, said nothing. His eyes were on Richardson.

The cop whistled as he bent down and looked inside the stall. When he stood up again, his jaw was jutting. "Call homicide at headquarters," he ordered the attendant. "And tell them to call the medical examiner. I'll have to stay here until they come." He got out a notebook,

began asking questions, writing out his report. Joe went outside to phone.

"Joe and I found him like you see him," Slate explained grimly. "Mr. Owen here might know something about it. I figured you'd want to know about it before it leaked out on the track, Mister Richardson."

Richardson said: "That's right," sourly. "Your trainer, Owen?"

Owen nodded, started to speak, but shut up as the cop glared at him.

The policeman said: "Well, hell! This ain't going to be so swell for the track, I guess, but it don't have to be made public yet. What you think was the idea?"

"To keep my hounds from running!" Owen flared suddenly. "That's the idea, if you want to know! By God! Where's fu Manchu? Where's my greyhound?"

"I was sort of waiting for you to get excited about that," Slate said with a slow drawl that veiled quickened interest.

"Yeah?" Owen retorted angrily again. "You seem to know a hell of a lot about this yourself!"

"Guess you're right, Owen," Slate answered. "Guess I aim to."

"You'd better watch your step, Slate," Richardson said. "This is murder. Remember that! The homicide squad will handle it, I imagine, without your help. You stick to watching out for pickpockets."

The cop eyed the three of them, made another note in his book, said nothing. Joe, the attendant, came back into the building. "Homicide'll be right over," he announced. "I'd better get the dogs out of here before then."

"You'd better leave Mr. Owen's fu Manchu where you find him, Joe," Nick Slate suggested mildly. "You'll find him in one of the stalls."

He walked along the double tier of kennels, blinking a small flashlight into each one. fu Manchu was stretched out in

Stall 24, dead from a blow on the head.

Owen followed him, began cursing again at the sight. Richardson and the policeman stood back by the body of Ribbon. Joe was collecting muzzles and leashes from a rack in one end of the building.

"How much was being bet on this dog?" Slate asked Owen. "You don't have to tell me. I don't have to tell about the gun I took from you."

Owen hesitated, stopped swearing, eyed Slate speculatively.

"Well?" Slate asked.

"Fifty grand," Owen said. "A pool in St. Petersburg. Ten of us."

Nick Slate nodded slowly. His eyes seemed heavy-lidded. "And now that your pooch won't run again?" he asked.

"We lose fifty grand," Owen muttered. "No scratches allowed in that bet. That's why I had Ribs stay with the dog all the time."

"You said you had fifteen dogs," Slate reminded him. "Why not run one of them now?"

Charley Owen stepped close to Slate, tapped him on the chest with a pudgy forefinger. "That's part of the bet," he said sourly. "I can switch any racer I own for fu, and so can Jackwall and his crowd switch a Jackwall dog for Tinpan. But the hell of it is, I've got nothing, absolutely nothing, mister, in the quarter mile heat that'll touch this Tinpan. fu Manchu could and did take him. But I haven't got fu now!"

Slate lifted his shoulders and said: "Maybe you haven't got fifty grand any more, either. I'd keep that bet secret a while!"

NICK SLATE'S lanky figure idled unostentatiously near the entrance to the entrance to the Flagler Track clubhouse. Down along the stands, and under them where the public made their bets,

a milling crowd swarmed, worming their way up to the betting booths and back again.

But in the club house there was a sense of quietness, of sureness. It was here that the big-money bets were laid—bets not on the board, bets between owners and backers and dog fanciers.

Back further along the stands, where darkness was intensified under and around the lights near the dog house, the homicide squad was on the job. Owen had been questioned and allowed to go comparatively free about the track grounds. The dog handlers were being grilled, for what little information they might have—which was none at all.

The murderer had entered the kennel, done his grisly task, and walked out again. So far as the police knew, the killer might have been Joe, or one of the other attendants, or even Nick Slate himself. A motive was lacking. Nobody had mentioned Jackwall being around.

Slate watched the club-house windows until he was sure he recognized the stocky, solid figure of Harry Jackwall inside the building. He ambled on up the steps, went inside, stood a moment until Jackwall was alone. He called the gambler by name, grinned wistfully at him.

"I thought maybe, Mr. Jackwall," Slate said, "that I'd find a chap named Charley Owen up here somewhere. He mentioned knowing you."

"Hi'ya, Slate," Jackwall exclaimed jovially. "Owen? Sure he knows me. I just heard about a little trouble or something down at the kennels. You should know something about that, eh?"

"Homicide squad's down there now," Slate said in his drawling voice. "Owen's trainer got himself killed, and his pooch, Fu Manchu, too. Most anybody working back there could have done the job, I guess, or anybody racing a dog tonight here could have gotten into the kennels.

I've got a hunch the police won't work it out right."

Jackwall's joviality left him. Sternness, sharpness came on his face like a mask. He studied Slate a long moment and asked: "You think I should go down there and talk to the law, Slate?"

Nick Slate shook his head. "Thought I might save you the walk, Mr. Jackwall. I know Owen hasn't mentioned this to the cops yet, and I think he won't—not until he sees you, anyhow. What I'm sort of wondering is, you goin' to call off that fifty-grand bet with him?"

"Ah-h-h!" Jackwell's breath came from between clamped teeth. "No! By God, no! It was a fair bet. He took the same chances I took. He won the first race. Suppose it had been Tinpan killed instead of his Fu Manchu? Would I renig? Would I squawk?"

"Well, I guess you wouldn't squawk," Slate said. "I guess, maybe, this Charley Owen won't squawk, either. But it's a lot of dough." He walked away, ambled back outside the club house.

The first race was already starting, with Fu Manchu's name replaced on the board by a dog called Ringo. The betting public was crowding the lower rail down in front of the stand, and above, the stand itself was almost filled.

Slate idled over nearer the rail, saw the swishing streak of the rabbit on the track as it went around the course to pick up the dogs. He stood watching until the greyhounds were sprung from their cages, noted that Tinpan got away first, held the lead easily. Slate had missed that race in the afternoon.

Slate was less than halfway back toward the dog house when the winner was named on the electric board on the judges' stand—Tinpan. A voice over the public-address system announced a new track record. The band in the grandstand began to play.

AROUND the corner of the kennels, Joe, the red-coated assistant, appeared with a homicide detective. Another dog handler had taken his place while the police quizzed him again. He appeared calm, as though he enjoyed the procedure, the attention.

"Not getting much of anywhere, Slate," the detective from headquarters called quietly. "Guess I'll have to talk with Owen again. Quick-tempered bird, that Owen."

"I guess he don't know much about it," Slate answered.

He went into the kennel building, walked the length of it, came back down along the stalls again. He paid no attention to the stall where the body of Owen's dog handler had been found. Two cops lounged against the double tiers, nodded to him curtly.

He paused at the stall where he had found Fu Manchu dead. The lock on the stall door was as he had discovered it—smashed. He examined it more carefully, made sure it had been shattered in an attempt to shut the door, not to get it open. The markings on the wood showed that.

Outside, the dogs from the first race were being led back by the red-uniformed attendants, but they were not being taken to the kennel. They were being turned over to their owners or owners' trainers at a side entrance to the track.

Slate stood stock still suddenly in the shadow of the building. Two things came to him simultaneously; the first a thought, the second a tougher realization. The thought was that whoever had killed Jeff Ribbon had killed the dog, Fu Manchu, first, and had been caught in the act and been obliged to kill Ribbon to cover up his identity. The way that stall-door lock had been broken proved that.

The tougher realization was that somebody was tailing him now. It was more

than a vague sense of being followed. It was a real feeling.

The inclination urging him to turn abruptly and face the farther gloomy wall of the track was overwhelming. He turned, ducked, heard the *whish* of an object fly past his crouched shoulders, saw the faint gleam of a steel blade. Then the knife tucked its sharpness into the earth forty feet away, near the rear wall of the kennel.

Slate shoved himself upright, strode rapidly toward the rear fence. The barking, yipping of greyhounds greeted him. Ten red-coated handlers and ten dogs were coming toward him from a gate in the fence. There was nobody else in sight. It was impossible that one of the handlers could have thrown that knife without being detected by some of the others. As he turned, he saw Jackwall moving off out of darkness into light toward the stands. Jackwall might have come from anywhere, might have thrown the knife himself.

Slate prowled until he found the knife, after the handlers and dogs had passed. He saw it was little different from the knife that had killed Ribbon—an ordinary fish knife, long-bladed, sharp, with a jack-knife handle. There were hundreds of such knives to be had on Miami Beach.

He started back toward the grandstand, saw Richardson, the track manager, walking ahead of him. Richardson saw him over his shoulder, waited for him. The manager's face was grave, his eyes darkly angry.

"You found out something, Slate?" Richardson demanded.

"Something," Slate admitted. "Not much. I found out the dog was killed first and Owen's trainer afterwards."

"Anything else?" Richardson insisted. "I saw Jackwall and he said you were talking with him—about a bet."

"That's right," Slate agreed. "About

a bet. Fifty grand's a lot of dough to bet on two dogs in three races. Yup, I found that out, too. And I found a fish-knife somebody heaved at me. It won't prove anything except that some people heave fish knives at me—and miss."

"Listen," Richardson said earnestly. "Take this tip! Jackwall thinks you know too much! You watch Jackwall, Slate. Watch him!"

Richardson turned abruptly, strode off toward the club house.

THE fourth race was a Daily Double event, the first of the two Doubles of the evening. A bet on the winning dog in both Doubles would pay somewhere between forty and ninety dollars, depending up how the odds came out at the end.

Slate idled up to a Doubles betting window, laid his money, got his ticket. It was the only bet he made during the week and he had never won yet, but he was persistent, patient. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of the fat figure of Charley Owen, watching the track morosely, and not too far away was a detective from homicide.

Slate ambled over to the detective, stood there beside him until he was sure Owen saw him and saw the detective also.

"The chief is havin' all these guys that might know somethin' come down to headquarters after the track closes," the detective said. "I got to tail this bird Owen until then, but I guess he don't know nothin' about this case. Anyhow, I got to follow him, and maybe you better come on down with the crowd, Slate. Down to see the chief, I mean."

"We'll be around, Herman," Slate promised.

The homicide detective faded away into the crowd, headed for the nearest coffee-and-sandwich stand under the grandstand. Nick Slate moved toward Charley Owen, stood beside him, saying nothing.

"I was looking for Jackwall," the fat dog owner said to Slate. He spoke as though only to make conversation, but there was a depth in his voice that held feeling.

"About that bet?" Slate asked.

"I guess I'm stuck for that," Owen said soberly. "No, it was about something else. Maybe I shouldn't tell you. I might be wrong."

"You were wrong once tonight, Owen." Slate touched his coat pocket significantly where the gun he had taken from Owen still made a compact, hard weight. "Did you tell the law about the bet yet?"

"I took your advice," Owen replied evenly. "I didn't tell them."

"Oh?"

"The money's being held," Owen said. "It's in the clubhouse safe. I don't have to pay him off. He can get it when he wants it, after the last race. I wanted to ask him something else, something Richardson told me about a few minutes ago."

"Well?" Slate asked.

"I just want to tell Jackwall," Owen said, "that he wins his gamble in money, but he don't want to make any passes at me."

"He shouldn't do that, now," Slate drawled. "You've had trouble enough for one night, Owen. You lost a fine dog and a trainer and all that money that you and your friends put up." He squinted down at the fat man, studied him from beneath veiled, idle-appearing, somber lids.

"I'm not hunting trouble," Owen stated flatly. "I know I've got a temper that gets away from me sometimes. But I think I'd better go see Jackwall, just to let him know."

Owen started to walk off, but Slate put a hand on his arm. "I just thought of it, Mr. Owen. Maybe I'd better go in and ask Jackwall to come out and talk with you. Somewhere in back, so the law won't

be botherin' Jackwall—seein' you talk to him."

"By God!" Owen cried. "You seem to be pretty damned interested in protecting that gambler!"

"It's not that, Mr. Owen. It's more like this, if you understand me. Bein' a sort of private detective on the track here, my job is sort of to help people, not to hinder them. They come here to gamble on the dogs, and that's the track's business. The track hires me, so my job is to see that people can gamble here without being bothered too much."

He looked sleepily at Owen, nodded, and walked toward the club house. The band was playing again and the lights were off around the track proper, preparatory to the fanfare of the next race. As he turned up the club-house steps, he saw over his shoulder that Owen was following him slowly, hesitantly, and that Herman, the homicide detective, was nowhere in sight.

THERE were several groups of people sitting on the club-house porch now, waiting for the seventh race to flash up—men and women in natty, light clothes, talking, laughing. He found Jackwall sitting on the porch railing talking with Richardson on a far end of the porch. The two men were talking quietly, yet there was an atmosphere of tenseness about them.

Slate went straight to them and said to Jackwall: "That fellow we were talkin' about a while back, Mr. Jackwall, he'd like to see you out back in private right away."

A flash of understanding passed between the gambler and the track manager, but Slate pretended to miss it.

"I'll talk with him, all right!" Jackwall growled and got up.

Without excusing himself to Richardson, he strode away, a stolid, healthy bulk

of a man with broad shoulders hunched forward as though about to strike.

"He's pretty damned mad," Richardson said to Slate. "Mad and scared. I'd say. Yes, sir. Jackwall's afraid Owen will holler out loud about that bet, and the law will jump on that as a motive for killing Owen's dog and Owen's trainer."

"You think Jackwall did the killing?"

"Hell, no!" Richardson exclaimed eagerly. "He's a gambler, Jackwall is! He'd take the loss, if he lost, and shut up. I'd hate to say he was the killer, Slate! Didn't you tell me that whoever killed that trainer killed the dog first?"

"Sure," Slate agreed. "Somebody killed the dog and got caught in the act by this fellow Ribbon, and had to kill Ribbon to protect himself. I don't believe the cops will catch up with him, Mr. Richardson, but I've got a hunch the murderer has already given himself away. I think I'll probably catch him myself."

"I sure hope you do, Slate," Richardson said. "And if I were you, I'd take a sneak out back and see what those two are up to. One murder on this track is about all we can stand."

"That's something I was sort of plannin' on doin' right now," Slate said and, nodding gloomily, moved off through the club house.

He went out the back way, down the steps into almost complete darkness. The building was near a high wall of the track's outside fence, and the lights from the rear windows gave little glow into the gloom beyond. Slate stood near the bottom of the steps a moment, then moved further away from them, listening.

He heard Jackwall's voice, and Owen's. They were talking in low tones, angrily, but not loud enough so he could hear their words distinctly. In the near distance the band stopped playing. He edged closer to the two men, keeping in black shadow himself, trying hard to see the positions

of the two. Then Jackwall said clearly: "I said I'd break you, and I will! If you think—"

Something hard, blunt, crashed against Nick Slate's head. Fire flamed, seethed an instant in his brain. His last thought, as he fell was of speed—the speed with which he had been attacked.

SLATE'S consciousness returned to him in a series of splitting throbs. He moved his hands, felt of his head. His hat had fallen off and there was a splotch of blood where he touched his hair.

He was positive that either Jackwall or Owen could have sneaked up behind him and knocked him out.

He got to his feet, moving slowly, getting his bearings. As he stood there, his feet crunched on glass. At first he paid no attention to it. Then the sensation gnawed at him. He stooped, found several pieces on the ground, felt them for thickness.

Window glass!

Perplexity and annoyance made lines on his tanned features. He stood still, listening, heard the beginning of band music out across the Flagler Street track. But he could not hear voices. Moving ahead through the darkness, he saw that Jackwall and Owen were gone.

A sudden glow of lights from in front of the club house lightened the darkness as the track lights went on for the start of another race.

Nick Slate retraced his steps, went back into the club house by the rear door. He stood at the sink in the small kitchen, bathed his head, brushed cold water over his face and eyes. A waiter came into the kitchen, eyed him curiously, went out again carrying a tray of bottles.

When the waiter had gone, Slate stepped to the rear window in the kitchen, examined it, then went to the next window. Both were intact, locked, and their

glass was unbroken. He opened one, found it moved up without noise. Looking down, he noted that the distance to a man's head beneath the window was within arm's reach, about the right height for a blow.

He shut the window, locked it, studied a moment, and went along the rear wall of the kitchen into a pantry. There was one window here, locked also, but near the lock on the middle sill there was an arc of glass missing that left a hole large enough for a hand to reach in and unfasten the lock.

A drawn, grim smile began to play over Slate's features.

He went back into the kitchen, down the rear steps along the rear wall of the club house, groping his way in the gloomy recess between the race-track wall and the wall of the building.

What he was searching for was not there, but he found a good substitute for it—a solid and fairly large packing box. The box was not under the window, but it was close enough so that it could be moved beneath the pantry window without much trouble.

There was wary satisfaction on Slate's face as he strode round the club-house building to the front. He did not go inside again, but ambled into the crowd that still lingered for the last race of the night.

He went once more to the Doubles window, asked who had won, found that he had lost again. He shrugged, grinned goodnaturedly, strode away toward the dog house.

THE two homicide detectives still leaned against the stalls when he went inside. It was as though they had not moved, but there were a number of cigarette butts scattered over the floor around them.

"Anything new come up?" he asked.

"Nothing," one of them said.

"They got this Owen fellow?" Slate demanded.

"Sure. He's been sittin' over at the club house, waiting. He sort of got over bein' mad at us for askin' questions. He's gettin' wise."

"Who else is going down to headquarters?" Slate asked.

"Most of the track attendants who handle these pooches. The chief, he's a hellion on details. He says to us, we get enough details and he'll solve any crime that comes along."

"So this time he's going to make a try at gettin' the details himself," the other detective from homicide explained. "All we got to do is stand round and sit round, but I bet we don't make no pinch unless it's this bird Owen."

"I'll try and be there myself," Slate said.

"You'd better. The chief'll want to hear what you got to say about these attendants with them red monkey suits."

"Richardson, the track manager, hires them," Slate said. He'd be the one the chief should ask about them."

"He'll be there, too, Slate," the second dick said. "He's going to drive down himself, so I heard him say. He's got to close up the joint first, hasn't he?"

"Either Richardson, or Riley, his assistant, or me," Slate told them. "I'll be seeing you."

"Yeah, but I'd rather go home and fall into the hay myself."

Slate said, "So would I," and went back outside. He stayed in the lighted area this time, went down to the rail, watched the last race come in. The two lead dogs, coming down the stretch, nose and nose, lost their tempers and began fighting. The entire pack smashed past them over the line, leaving them still fighting as their two attendants ran down to part them.

The crowd howled and some of them swore. There was a surge toward the

paying booths under the stands. The lights went out around the track as the dogs were led away.

Outside the track fence, the rumble of cars replaced the usual sound of the band. More lights began blinking out around the track.

Slate stood at the rail, watching the people move past, out through the gate beyond. He turned when Richardson called to him. The track manager was coming along from the club house, which was already dark.

"You stick round, Slate," Richardson directed. "Lock up for me. I've got to go down to police headquarters. When you finish, you can come on down yourself if you want to find out what's going on. Or maybe you know already."

"Not much more than I did a while ago," Slate replied. "Sure, I'll lock up. You locked the club house, didn't you?"

"Riley did," Slate said. "See you later." The track manager walked away, went out the gate.

Nick Slate still stood there by the rail. He saw Herman and Owen come from under the stand and go out after Richardson. A few moments later another detective came along, stopped.

"Going down to see the show at headquarters?" the detective asked. "It'll be just routine grilling, I guess. This is a hell of a murder case. It's too damned open. Wide open. You coming?"

"Later, maybe," Slate answered. "After I close up all around."

The stolid figure of the detective went through the gate, disappeared. The two gatemen and the ticket sellers waved and went out. The betting booths were dark gaps in blackness under the main stand.

Slate came away from the track rail abruptly, started off at a brisk walk toward the dog house. His manner changed completely. The slow, wistful, gangling movement of features and body became hard, tightly drawn. His eyes smoldered.

He took a flashlight from his pocket, blinked it on the dog house, went past to the rear fence gate, saw it was locked. He made a complete, rapid circuit of the outer track wall, came back to the main stand again, slid silently, invisibly into the darkness.

FOR fully five minutes, Slate stood in the blackness under the stand, listening, but no sound reached his ears save the rumble of cars outside on the street, the occasional lilt of voices as people passed.

He was alone in the track—alone, so far as he knew. But there had been a dead dog and a dead man that night, and there had been a fish knife heaved at him in the darkness earlier, while a thousand people stood within hailing distance. Nick Slate, like a shadow, began to slide noiselessly toward the club house!

He went between the wall of the track and the club building, hugged the track wall where the lights from the street and buildings outside did not reach him. He held the flash in his left hand, his own gun in his right. The gun he had taken from Charley Owen still made weight in his coat pocket.

There was a long moment, as he moved forward, when he could see absolutely nothing. Then, vaguely, he discerned the lack of something that he had seen there earlier.

Steadying his eyes, he strained into the blackness. His head nodded slowly, methodically, like a man who has made a chess move that he has figured out well in advance and which satisfies him. The box he had spotted had been moved.

It was directly beneath the pantry window, and the window was open from the bottom wide enough for a man to enter with comparative ease.

A sense of disaster began to gnaw at Slate as he stood there in darkness, a sense of futility. It was one thing to track

a criminal, to wait outside for him to come out. It was another thing to go in after him single-handed.

But there was that front door, and a side door besides, that could be opened from within. There was not much chance of anyone entering by a window, and emerging by the same route, with two doors offering quick, easy exit. Yet there was reason, too. There was Slate himself!

Once more that hard grin came upon his features. He moved over to the box, pocketed his flash but held his gun ready as he climbed up. He balanced himself, tried to hear sounds that could not be heard, then swung a leg over the window sill, swung his body inside, stood on the pantry floor.

The pantry door was shut. He pushed it open gently, slowly, stepped into the small kitchen of the club house. Moving to the center of the kitchen, he stood silent, straining ears and eyes. A slow, methodical drip, drip, drip of water from a faucet was the only sound. He orientated himself, found the kitchen swing-door leading into the front part of the building.

He went through it into a large room that he knew was laid out with tables and chairs and settees.

Standing quietly, poised on the balls of his feet, he heard for the first time a muffled sound that was like heavy hammering on metal in a confined, closed space. The sound kept up with the persistence of the dripping water in the kitchen.

Slate moved toward the noise, realized as he moved that he was headed for the club-house office, the office used by Richardson and Riley, the room where the larger bets were laid on the dogs.

The pounding stopped abruptly, started again, louder, then stopped entirely with a resounding thud and something that was like an echo of the thud.

Slate started forward quickly, jerked out his torch. His body hit a chair, careened off it as he tried to steady himself. He swung against a table, tried to catch his balance by putting a hand on it. The table tipped, went over, crashed to the floor. With a curse, Slate sprang aside, flicked on his electric flash, tried to aim it at the office door.

HE found the wall with the light, then the door panel. His senses warned him that the door was already opening. A flash of fire burst from the doorway before he could spring aside. The flashlight in his left hand shattered and his hand felt numb and sticky. A second explosion blasted from the doorway and a slug plowed through the flesh of his left leg above the knee.

Slate staggered. His own gun jerked in his right hand, the muzzle streaking out a jet of fire. He shot again and tripped over a chair.

A body hurtled through the blackness, hot breath panted against his face and a fist hammered against his mouth, loosened teeth, drew blood that tasted warm, salty. He swung his gun again, missed completely.

And as suddenly as the attack had started, it ended! The fingers jerked away from his throat. The body on top of him leaped off, crashed against furniture. The sounds started to die away.

Nick Slate swore, shook himself into renewed activity. He struggled to his feet, wobbled a moment, plunged after the retreating sounds, his arms flaying tables and chairs aside as he ran.

The kitchen door slammed back into his face as he lunged at it in the darkness. He bounced away, swung up his gun, fired, and kicked the door wide open.

There was no answering fire. He plunged through the doorway, swung toward the pantry, heard a bang, realized

the pantry door had opened and closed. He hunched, dove at it.

His shoulder burst it open the wrong way, sent it splintering down off its hinges. He went to his knees, saw a vague figure dropping off the window sill to the ground outside.

Slate threw up his gun, but the target had disappeared. He roared at the figure, scrambled to his feet, went through the window, taking the sash with him.

He missed the box under the window completely, went over it and felt shattered glass and broken splinters dig into his hands and knees as he landed. He leaped to his feet, whirled, staring about him.

The figure was rounding the corner of the club house. A faint glow of light outlined it from a higher building over the track fence.

Slate fired his gun as he ran. The figure stumbled, turned, fired back at him, then ran on. Somewhere outside, a police whistle shrilled three times, was followed by an answering whistle further off. The figure hit the shadow of the fence, whirled, crouched. Flame burst from the man's gun. The slug creased Slate's head.

Slate dropped to one knee, took aim, saw the figure suddenly leap up into the air, clutch at the top of the fence. The gun jerked in Slate's hand again. He saw the figure crouch as though in response, heard a muffled curse. Then the man had his leg over the fence top, was pawing his way over.

Nick Slate swore, lunged up and forward. He forgot the gun in his hand as he ran. Then he was in the air, diving upward, his arms stretched ahead of him.

The figure, halfway over the fence, kicked out at him. The shoe caught Slate square in the face, made stars against blackness in his head. His arms encircled the man's leg, clung there as Slate's body

swung down, dragging, hauling the figure back off the fence.

The man fired once more as he fell. The bullet slugged along Slate's back, seared his flesh, thudded into the ground. Then the two men were down, pawing, kicking, slugging with fists and guns!

SLATE twisted, heaved, rolled, got on top. His fist hammered into the man's belly, hammered again. The figure swung up at the torso, spat blood, coughed, flopped back again. Slate crashed his fist into the stomach again, sprang to his feet, jerked the man upright.

A voice bellowed on the other side of the track fence near them, and another voice joined the first.

"Come over the fence!" Slate shouted. "Bring a light!"

But even as he called, a peculiar expression came over his bloody features. His eyes gleamed, and once again there was satisfaction in his eyes. He shook the man in his grip. "Richardson!" he muttered. "Richardson, damn you, snap out of it!"

Slate put his hands in the track manager's pocket, went through his clothes, and his fists came out holding two thick wads of bills bound with heavy rubber bands.

A torch blinked at them from the fence top, then swung down as the cop jumped to the ground. "What th' hell's goin' on here?" he demanded.

"It's a pinch," Slate growled at them. "That's all it is, a pinch!" He glanced over his shoulder, blinked into the light held on him, and demanded belligerently: "Go get an ambulance, one of you, and call police headquarters. Tell 'em—"

"Damn!" Richardson said suddenly. "I'll tell 'em, myself."

"Sure," the cop said. "Take it easy, there, guy."

The second cop ran down the track

toward the phone booths under the grandstand. Slate said to the cop with them: "You! Get out that book of yours and write it down. This bird'll sign it. It's a confession!"

The cop fumbled inside his coat, produced notebook, pencil.

Slate said, as though reciting, but with a tired inflection: "I wanted the hundred grand Charley Owen and Harry Jackwall gave me to hold for them, as bet money, on three races between Owen's Fu Manch and Jackwall's Tinpan. I tried to stall off the races by killing Owen's dog, to give me time to get the money out tonight before the bet was over. Owen's trainer caught me, and I had to kill him. His name was Jeff Ribbon."

The cop scribbled a moment, said: "Yup. Go on with it."

"I got afraid of Nick Slate, and tried to scare him off. I threw a knife at him but he wouldn't scare. I set Owen and Jackwall against each other, so they would get into a fight and get arrested. That was to give me more time to steal their money. I knocked Slate out at the same time, so I could fix up the club-house window for an entrance. I opened the safe after I sneaked back here through the dog gate, took the money, and knocked the knob off the safe to make it look like an ordinary robbery."

Slate said, when the cop had finished writing that: "Now, Richardson, you snap out of it long enough to sign this statement, or I'll break you into plenty of pieces. Sign it!"

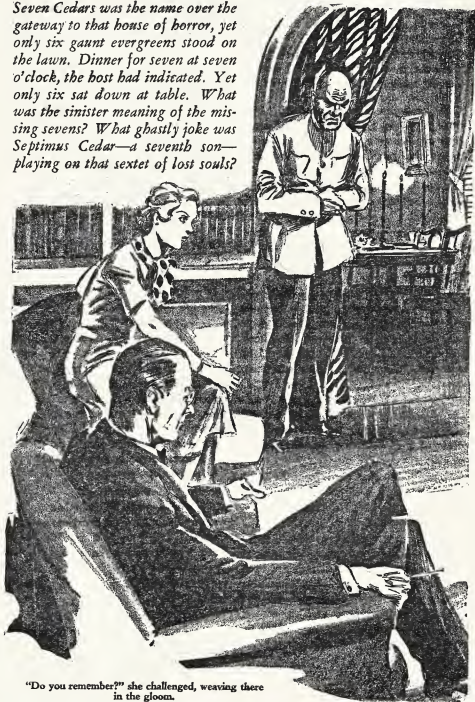
Richardson blinked, coughed, signed his name.

"And you," Slate said to the cop, "put down there somewhere how this confession is of his own free will and accord or whatever it is."

The cop said, "Geez, guy!" and wrote it out.

The Seventh Cedar

Seven Cedars was the name over the gateway to that house of horror, yet only six gaunt evergreens stood on the lawn. Dinner for seven at seven o'clock, the host had indicated. Yet only six sat down at table. What was the sinister meaning of the missing sevens? What ghastly joke was Septimus Cedar—a seventh son—playing on that sextet of lost souls?



"Do you remember?" she challenged, weaving there
in the gloom.

by Allan Vaughan Elston

Author of "Star Witness," etc.



CHAPTER ONE

Port of Missing Brides

BYOND the arched gate, a lawn sloped up in a steep, green sweep to the house. It was a tall, eaveless structure, I noted, shuttered and severely colonial. Midway on its lawn six cedar trees were growing in a row. They were about ten paces apart and obviously had been planted. Six of these cedars there were, no more, no less.

Why six?

Seven Cedars was the name boldly inscribed over the gate. And I recalled that the stationery of my client, Captain John Temple, which bore the message summoning me to this North Jersey country estate, was likewise engraved—*Seven Cedars*. Yet the number of cedars was a definite six.

Where—my mind instantly and inevitably inquired—was the seventh cedar?

After driving through the arched gate and circling the lawn, I parked in a court to the left of the house. I was but a minute or so late, Temple having asked me to call at six o'clock.

At my knock, the door of the house was opened by a bald old bullet-head who immediately struck me as an Oriental—and a tough one. His thin, leather-brown face was seamed and pitted. A scar the full width of his forehead was deep and frightful. A battered old customer from somewhere east of Arabia, I decided, probably a Hindu.

THE fellow backed away from me, bowing awkwardly, with which crab-like progress he lured me into a gunroom on the right of the hall. There I found Captain Temple in the company of a young collegian in creamy flannels. This younger man was pacing the floor with such morbid preoccupation that he did not notice my entrance.

"Here you are, Conroy. Good!" John Temple, stocky and solid, prematurely gray, greeted me with his hard-fisted grip. "Bud, meet my attorney, Conroy. Conroy, this is Bud Arkles."

Young Arkles relaxed long enough to shake hands.

"Look sharp, Rokh," Temple then said to his East-Indian servant. "And remember, you're to serve dinner for seven promptly at seven."

Rokh backed from the room. As my

eyes followed him, I became more and more convinced that the fellow should have been stevedoring around Singapore rather than butlering in New Jersey.

Once he was gone, Temple was all business. He looked at his watch, snapped it shut with a click and said: "There's a deal to tell you in less than an hour, Conroy. Will you sit down?"

"You want legal advice, I presume?" I queried taking a chair.

"Nothing like that," he said. "I just want you as a witness to a showdown due during the evening at this house."

Naturally I was bewildered. "A showdown on what issue?"

"An affair of mystery, Conroy. And if I've tagged him rightly, the villain of the piece will dine with us at seven."

"And my rôle will be?"

"Merely to size him up," Temple said. "Keep your eyes open and your reason pliable. You're supposed to have a judicial mind, so I want your reactions."

"Can't we be getting along?" complained young Arkles. He jerked fretfully toward us, again plowing a hand through his shock of reddish hair. "We've less than an hour, you know."

"Right. Briefly, here's the situation, Conroy." From now on Temple's voice drove like the piston of an engine. "Three years ago one Septimus Cedar, a seventh son, was honeymooning in the South Seas. His bride was approached on the dark deck, one night, by a Lascar sailor who whispered to her a warning. The lady, though startled, was incredulous. She refused to believe the terrible crimes which the whispering lascar imputed to her husband, Septimus Cedar. Seeing that his warning was in vain, the lascar begged her not to speak of it."

"And did she?" I asked.

"She did not. Otherwise she would have brought her husband's wrath heavily on the man's head."

"Just what warning did the Lascar whisper," I inquired, "to the bride of Septimus Cedar?"

For the last minute I had been staring thoughtfully out a window, regarding those evenly spaced six cedars. And still pondering on that misnomer over the arched gateway—*Seven Cedars!*

Then I saw that my host and client, John Temple, was pulling a bell cord. In response, the bald old bullet-head of an East Indian came sidling into the room.

"Rokh," Temple said to him, "the gentleman would like to know just what words of warning you spoke, on a dark deck in the South Seas, to the bride of Septimus Cedar."

REVELATION that it was Rokh who had passed that warning shocked me. Yet I hadn't missed his pedigree far, after all. Instead of a Singapore stevedore the man was a Lascar sailor.

He answered bluntly in surprisingly glib English: "I say to lady: 'You are his fifth; when he tires of you he will push you into deep pit. It was so with the others.'"

"Did the lady believe you?" prompted Temple.

"She do not believe me, master."

"What became of her, Rokh?"

"Her maid, she tell me the lady be downstairs right away, master."

That quite staggered me. "You mean to say," I gasped, "that—"

"Let the lady speak for herself," Temple cut in. "Come."

Temple led us out of the gun-room and across the hall to a spacious library. We had been there barely a minute when a slim and pretty woman, in her upper thirties, I judged, joined us. She was a brunette of grace and charm, and I liked her at once.

It was plain that Temple did too. "Ah, here you are, Alicia." He moved quickly,

almost eagerly, to her and took both her hands. In the next short second of time I glimpsed a new Temple. His iron-gray grimness was, for that instant, swept away. He was like a courtier, ardent, greeting his lady love.

Yet when he turned about he was again his old, stony self. "Alicia, this is Mr. Conroy, my attorney. Conroy, this is Miss Carterall."

"Can't we skip the formalities and be getting along with it?" came impatiently from Bud Arkles. And I suddenly realized how nervously impatient they all were. I was myself. Most of all was this slim, dark lady whose fingertips were now touching my own. Those fingers were icy. Her poise was too rigid to be natural. I knew that she was laboring under some grave tension.

"He is right. Let us be getting on with it, Mr. Conroy," she said. "Know then that although I have chosen to assume my maiden name, actually I am the divorced wife of Septimus Cedar."

That forthrightness helped to collect my wits. To collect them further, I tried to imagine that she was a witness in court and I, the interviewing attorney. "You were cruising with your husband some three years ago, were you?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

"And did a Lascar sailor warn you as follows: 'You are his fifth; when he tires of you he will push you into a deep pit. It was so with the others?'"

"Yes, Mr. Conroy."

Temple was placing a chair for her. She sat on the edge of it, not at all restfully. She was not dressed for a dinner party. Temple, in fact, had mentioned that two of the guests would walk directly here from a nearby golf course.

I now asked: "What of importance followed the incident of the warning, Miss Carterall?"

"A little while later," she said, "we

went ashore on an island. I was walking with my husband in the moonlight, up a jungle path toward a cliff overlooking the sea. Suddenly the dark mouth of a pit loomed directly in front of me. I felt Mr. Cedar's grip tighten on my arm. His face was changed. It was terrible. I knew that the warning was true—that he meant to push me into that pit."

HER voice raised as she said that, ending in a note of almost wild hysteria. I could see now the scars of pain in her eyes, and faint dark circles beneath them. One knew at once that a trail of tragedy lay behind her. Young Arkles, all this while, was standing by fretting, fuming. Since he was barely more than a callow collegian, I couldn't quite see where he figured. As for Temple, he was standing at Alicia's elbow like a stocky Gibraltar, his knotty fists clenched.

"And so what did you do?" I managed to inquire.

"I was terrified," she said. "I broke away and ran into the jungle. He came after me, shouting. I ran frantically on through the dark."

"He never caught you?"

"He did not, thank God!" This answer came fervently from John Temple.

Temple himself resumed the testimony. "A week later," he told me, "she was picked up by a tramp freighter calling in to trade with natives at a far end of that same island. It's a small island, by the way, until recently uncharted, somewhere between the Fijis and the Tongas."

"Hit the high spots, won't you," begged Arkles. "It's half past six."

"I myself," Temple said, "was a supernumerary on the tramp. Alicia had suffered frightful exposure, had endured fever, was at times delirious. I made it my business to take her to a hospital in Honolulu. Later, as she convalesced

there, she told me what she has now told you."

"And what did you do?"

"I set out to find Septimus Cedar."

A raging storm was hidden within the calm with which Captain Temple spoke.

"You went first," I suggested, "to the place she last saw him?"

"Yes. And found the pit. It was a good hundred feet deep. Anyone pushed into it would surely be killed. But I had myself lowered, on a rope, to its bottom."

I didn't want to ask the next question. Thinking of it made a cold spot form at the base of my spine.

"Nothing was there," Temple offered to my immeasurable relief. "Yet for that there was an obvious reason. A tunnel of sorts, led from the bottom of the pit and broke into daylight at the base of a marine cliff. The tunnel was merely a wave-washed crevice through the faulty rock. At every high tide the sea surged through it, although at low tide the bottom of the pit was dry."

His point was clear enough. A high tide swirling into the pit's bottom twice a day would, receding, tend to suck all light objects, such as shells and bones, with it. Weeks and months of such hydraulic action would swab the pit clean.

"By what excuse," I questioned, "did Septimus Cedar, in turn with each of five wives, visit the island?"

"He had a bamboo bungalow at the place," Temple said. "He kept a caretaker there, an old club-footed derelict by the name of Hargis."

"What became of Hargis?"

"I myself found the body of Hargis, abed in the bamboo bungalow. The indications led me to believe that he had died of fever."

"And Cedar?"

"Was last seen in those parts by Rokh." Captain Temple clapped his hands vigorously. In a moment Rokh appeared.

"Hot on the trail of the mystery,"

Temple explained, "I soon found Rokh. His testimony struck me as sincere, and it matches Alicia's. Come, Rokh—give it to Mr. Conroy as briefly as possible."

"I have the only sea-going launch at Palika," Rokh said. His response came so quickly that it might have been rehearsed.

"Where," I wanted to know, "is Palika?"

"What's the difference?" Bud Arkles complained. "If you must know, Palika is a village on an island separated by about a ten-hour, deep-water cruise from Cedar's bungalow. Get along Rokh."

ROKH continued. "Four times, Mr. Cedar he charter my launch to go with very new wife to this very pretty island. He have very nice bungalow there. Each time we get there, he tell me go back to Palika. He say maybe he live there little while with new wife. Always next time I see him at Palika he have another new wife. Five plenty nice wives he take to this very pretty island."

"Naturally you got suspicious, eh, Rokh?" Temple prompted. "So when you beached him there with his fourth bride, you did a bit of spying. Instead of heading out to sea on your return trip to Palika, you prowled up through the jungle to see what you could see."

Rokh nodded his bald, brown head vigorously.

"And what *did* you see?"

"I see Mr. Cedar push wife into pit."

"So what did you do then?"

"I put to sea for Palika."

"You reported the murder there?" I asked severely.

When Rokh shook his head, Temple came quickly to his rescue. "There's no police force at Palika," he said.

Then he tried to make me understand that Rokh had lived too long amongst savages to concern himself with the uxoricides of a Nordic. And what a man did

with his own property, a wife by the Eastern code being a man's property, was not vitally Rokh's business. He was, however, convinced that the same fate had befallen the other three wives of Septimus Cedar. He knew that he had taxied them all to the island and never seen them again.

"Nor was I able to find anyone who ever saw them again," Temple said. "I put in a year at it."

"Are you sure they ever existed?" I was eying the Lascar suspiciously.

"Quite sure of it," Temple said. "Many of the Palika natives saw Septimus Cedar on each of the five occasions when he embarked from there with a wife."

Gravely and sympathetically I faced Alicia Carterall Cedar. She was staring straight ahead, her face pallid from the shock of these recollections. John Temple stood with a brawny hand on her shoulder. Dinner for seven at seven o'clock, Temple had said. We here in the room were only four. Three more, therefore, were due.

I turned brusquely toward Rokh. "So while you weren't setting the law on this man Cedar, you did summon up enough human decency to warn his fifth wife. Later, she escaped the clutches of Cedar and was rescued by your present master. In the meantime, after his vain pursuit of his wife, what did Septimus Cedar do?"

"He bring his baggage down to the beach and say we go back to Palika. We go back to Palika. On the way there, he knock me overboard with capstan bar and go on alone."

Temple nodded confirmation. "Palika fishermen picked Rokh up half drowned. His launch was found beached just around a headland from Palika. Cedar disappeared, bag and baggage. He was never seen—until Alicia and I spotted him not long ago in New York."

"You were living in New York then?" I asked.

"Yes. I hadn't bought this country place then. In fact I bought it for the sole reason that the man we think is Septimus Cedar lives directly across the road."

THAT left me gasping. Yet in one illuminating flash I saw Temple's strategy. He was challenging Cedar. Every time the man fared forth from his house he must see this one—with its bold suggestion of a missing seventh cedar.

"I had six mature cedars planted by a forester," Temple explained. "That, I thought, would at least get a rise out of him."

"You mean that he denies he's Septimus Cedar?"

"Stoutly. That is I rang up his house from a pay station and asked for Septimus Cedar. 'This is the house of Leonard Landren,' the man, himself, answered. 'No such person as Septimus Cedar has ever been here!'"

"Are you sure it's the same man?"

"Alicia is sure of it. He hasn't seen her yet, but she's managed to see him many times. Having been his wife, she should be competent to identify him."

"What about Rokh?"

"Rokh also positively identifies Landren as Cedar," Temple said.

"Have you accused the man?" I asked.

Temple shook his head. "In court or out of it," he said, "he would simply deny he is Cedar. Then the case against him would fall flat."

And even if identified, I thought, the case against Cedar would be weak. His assault on Alicia was not committed, but merely contemplated. His alleged murders of the first three wives were not witnessed. As to the fourth, the only witness was Rokh. Rokh would make none too convincing a witness. Aside from all that was the matter of jurisdic-

tion. New Jersey courts were not concerned with South Sea murders.

Temple admitted all that. "Alicia wanted to leave the entire business alone," he said. "In fact she insisted on it until a new development forced us to act."

"And that?" I inquired.

"Is that Septimus Cedar is about to take to himself a sixth bride," Temple announced gravely. "She's a local girl just out of school and so—well, we just can't let it happen."

"I'll say we won't," Bud Arkles barked savagely, whacking a fist into his other palm. "I'll see him in hell first, damn him!"

At last I was able to catalogue Arkles. The boy was, of course, either a kinsman or a close friend of the sixth bride-to-be.

When I bluntly asked him which, the question confused him. Temple answered quickly for him. "A close friend, Conroy. They went to school together."

So then I knew that Arkles was a disappointed sweetheart. A neighborhood romance, no doubt, with its bud just ripening when along had come the dashing and much-married Septimus Cedar to spoil everything.

"You can see my own position, Conroy," Temple said. "I could hardly go to the girl or her parents with my evidence in its present form."

I saw that clearly.

"Yet Alicia is determined to save this young girl, Eve Marland, from tying up with Cedar. The man is twice the girl's age, but he fascinates her. Since he would deny the identity, it would do no good merely to warn the girl. So Alicia suggested that we frighten him away. I tried that with a row of six cedars and a misnomer on the gate, but it produced no results."

"So next?"

"I confided in Bud Arkles. So we plotted to meet Landren and Miss Mar-

land as though by accident on a golf course. There Bud introduced me as a friend. I cultivated the acquaintance until it was mature enough to warrant inviting them to dinner."

"Except for the contradiction of six cedars and the name over your gate, has the man any reason to suspect you as a challenger?"

"None at all. I have kept Rokh out of sight. And Alicia, with her maid, only arrived this afternoon."

Just then the mantel clock struck seven. "They're due now," Temple said. "I've invited them for dinner tonight."

"Septimus Cedar and his sixth?" I asked.

Then I heard the front door ringing eerily through the house. "There they are," John Temple said grimly. "Try to compose yourself, Alicia. Rokh, show them in."

CHAPTER TWO

Dinner for Seven

ROKH went to confront the man who, unless we were absurdly astray, he had last encountered on the occasion of being batted overboard with a capstan bar. And here among us, Alicia Carterall sat waiting with such strained tension that we were all bound to share it. Septimus Cedar, we knew, did not expect to see her here. Nor had he seen her at all since she had broken away from him at the death pit.

I moved to the hall arch, spying past the drapes there. I wanted a look at the fellow's face at the first instant of his contact with Rokh. If guilty, surely such a startling encounter would surprise him into making some move or exclamation which would give himself away.

When it distinctly failed to do so, I was almost ready to drop the case against Leonard Landren. He looked Rokh straight in the eyes without even a flush.

"Well, here we are, Eve," he said easily to the pretty young girl who entered with him. With a nonchalance not overdone he tossed his golf cap to the lascar and said: "We're Miss Marland and Mr. Landren. And not late, I hope."

As Rokh came backing toward my portieres, they followed him. I got out of the way just in time. Then I took a post from which I could size up the man at his first sight of Alicia. She, I saw, was braced as for a blinding shock.

She was seated directly in front of and facing the hall arch. The caller was bound to see her first of all when he entered the room.

He did see her. But again he failed to flush. He permitted his eyes to rest upon her for a moment, impersonally; then, quite calmly at ease, he looked about for Temple.

"Hello, Buddy. And how do you do, Mr. Temple." Those greetings came from Eve Marland. This girl seemed even younger than I had been led to believe.

Temple, making the best of it, introduced them to Alicia Carterall. Then he presented me. In Alicia, Landren seemed to take no more interest than is the due of any pretty woman.

A single glance at Landren and one could understand why the girl had found him attractive. He was not only finely built and handsome, but he had the way of a man who has been everywhere and knows everything.

"One of my guests," I heard John Temple say, "has not arrived. We shall not, however, wait long."

Landren dropped easily into a chair beside Alicia. "You live hereabouts, Miss Carterall?"

He faced her, smiling pleasantly. Which showed I thought, that he could not possibly be the rogue we wanted. After pushing four wives into a pit, surely no human could thus face a fifth who had escaped him! In this encounter, it was the woman

who was agitated. "No, I live in New York," she said, and looked so upset that I went to her rescue.

"You're an old settler here in Sussex County, are you, Mr. Landren?"

Landren laughed. "Not I. I never settle long in one spot. Been here, though, nearly a year. Rather like it."

I WENT out into the hall and found Rokh. "See here," I said. "Is that the fellow you knew in the South Seas as Septimus Cedar?"

"He are the man," Rokh said. "He hit me here, knock me off boat."

Returning to the library, I found Eve and Arkles still paired, while Landren was engaged by some question of Temple's. That gave me a chance for a whispered aside with Alicia. "Is he Septimus Cedar?" I asked.

She nodded quickly. "I am positive."

We were, I presumed, waiting for the seventh guest. A half dozen times, between seven o'clock and seven thirty John Temple looked at his watch and frowned. Who, I kept wondering, was this person for whom we waited?

At seven thirty Temple said to Rokh: "Ring him up, Rokh, and find out if he's coming."

The lascar went out. He returned in about three minutes and reported that he had been unable to call the belated guest because the telephone was out of order.

"We'll wait no longer," Temple said.

He offered an arm to Eve Marland. Without batting an eye, Leonard Landren offered his to Alicia who, by the record of testimony, had been his fifth wife. She was game enough to take it, though plainly she loathed the man.

Temple and Eve Marland led the way into the hall, followed by Landren and Alicia. The left-overs, Arkles and myself, went next, while Rokh brought up the rear.

In the dining room we found a table

set for seven. There was no light other than candles aligned from end to end of the table. Each candle stick, I noted, was shaped like the bole of a tree and had the look and smell of red cedar. There were seven of these candles—yet only six of them were lighted.

No apology was made for the unlighted candle. There it was; we could make of it what we would.

John Temple took the head of the table, placing Eve at his left and Alicia at his right. I was directed to the far end. Landren was placed next to Alicia. His position was such that the unlighted candle stood squarely before him.

On the other side of the table places were set for three. Two of these positions were occupied by Eve Marland and Bud Arkles. They did not sit next to each other, though. Between them was an empty chair—the place, presumably, of the unrarried guest. This vacant seat was directly across from Landren, with the unlighted candle directly between.

An odd arrangement, surely, yet a polite guest could hardly question it. Nor did Temple refer to it. All the while, I knew, he was posing an insidious challenge before Landren.

LANDREN, bafflingly composed, directed a lively chatter at Alicia. He drew from her barely more than one-word responses, while Eve had no better luck with Arkles.

"Buddy's feeling low-spirited," Eve said across the table. "Tell him a funny story, Leonard, and cheer him up."

Landren knew funny stories, and how to tell them. He took a ready command of the conversation through three courses, served awkwardly by Rokh.

The lascar, when not engaged, took a post directly back of the empty chair. There he would stand with his bald, bullet head inclined forward and his eyes fixed in a baleful stare at Landren. Occasion-

ally he touched the deep scar on his forehead. And Landren faced it with no visible disconcertion. With apparently perfect innocence he faced the unlighted candle, the empty chair and Rokh.

Nor did the presence of Alicia at his side in any way upset the man's aplomb. I was aroused to envy at the way in which he served her pretty compliments.

There was a false note somewhere, though. And at last I placed it. It was that Landren was *too* composed. He was ignoring the evident tension of Alicia. An innocent man, I decided, would note that; he would perhaps make some comment on it, or at least he would permit it to guide the flow of his chatter.

Eve by now had noticed it. She knew something was afoot, was looking askance, now and then, from one to another of us. And that, I realized, was a natural reaction of innocence. Innocence would feel the tension in the air, and be subdued by it. It subdued Eve Marland. Yet Landren quite ignored it.

Suddenly I knew that Landren was guilty as Satan himself. He was Septimus Cedar as Alicia said.

Rokh was staring steadily at him now, across the empty chair and the unlighted candle. Which reminded me that I didn't yet know for whom the empty chair had been provided. Hastily I reviewed the testimony of Rokh, of Alicia and of Temple. Most of the characters involved were assembled here. Was one of them absent?

There was, and after a moment of thought I placed him. What about that old, club-footed caretaker, Hargis? But Hargis was dead! Temple himself had found him dead. Even so, did the chair signify Hargis, confronting Landren in line with the unlighted candle?

NOW, well along in Landren's account of a tiger hunt, the bell of the front door rang shrilly. It cut raucously in on

Landren's recital and he was forced to pause while Temple said to Rokh: "There he is, at last. Well, better late than never. Show him in, Rokh."

The lascar withdrew. Stepping into the front hall, he closed the dining-room door behind him. Then he went forward to the main entrance of the house. We heard him open the door, heard the faint hum of his voice as he greeted a caller.

He came back along the hall, conducting the visitor toward us. We could not see, but we could hear. What we heard was a limping, clumping tread. Certain indication that this caller progressed under the handicap of some pedal affliction. He came bumping along down the hall, with an uneven cadence, as would a man with a wooden leg or a club foot.

Hargis? Of course not, for Hargis was dead. But—

Startled breathless, I almost forgot to watch Landren. When I did look his way, he seemed to be no more than mildly curious. Certainly there were no moist beads on his forehead.

Clump, clump! The steps reached the very door of our room. Then we were let down ridiculously. The lame visitor turned to one side down a narrower hall which I knew led to the study. In a moment Rokh came in alone.

"Who was it, Rokh?" Temple asked.

"Man come to fix telephone."

Did I only imagine that a smile of derision formed for an instant on the lips of Landren? Was the man laughing in his sleeve at this futile trap set by Temple?

I thought I could read defeat on my host's face. Had he played his last card? I saw him shrug his strong broad shoulders; then his eyes met Alicia's.

And now, as Temple weakened, Alicia seemed to grow more determined. The resolution of her slim, trim shoulders, the set of her lips, assured me that she did not mean to give up. Landren's marriage with Eve Marland was due within the

week—unless Alicia Carterall and John Temple succeeded in revealing the true identity of a monstrous murderer.

CHAPTER THREE

The Man with the Club Foot

DINNER over, our procession back to the library was in different order. Alicia took possession of John Temple while Eve followed with her fiancé. The older woman managed that in a frantic effort to hold a council of war. When I reached the library, Alicia had my host and client aside in an alcove. I could see that she was insisting upon some move to which he objected.

Suddenly Temple beckoned to me. "Nothing's left," he said in a sotto voice, "but to accuse the devil to his face. My idea now is to take him into the study, alone, and give him until midnight to get out of the state forever. In that case we promise not to tell the facts to Eve and her family."

I agreed that the kindest thing we could do would be to let the girl think Landren merely a bounding deserter.

But Alicia objected. She wanted to accuse Landren, was sure she could do it more effectively than anyone else.

While they argued, Rokh took the issue quite out of their hands. His voice startled us. Turning quickly, we saw that he was addressing, not Landren, but Eve Marland. "You are his sixth," the lascar said to Eve. "When he tires of you he will push you into a deep pit. It was so with the others."

Rokh bowed, caressed the scar on his forehead and fixed a steady gaze on Landren. Then, while we were all still gasping, he backed from the room.

Landren gaped after him. Then he turned with an assured smile and asked of Temple, "Is he screwy?"

Eve, after a moment of speechless shock, exclaimed: "It isn't at all funny,

Leonard. I don't like it. I want you to take me home."

Alicia went to her beseechingly. "Please be warned," she said. "I myself heard that same warning and didn't believe it. I was as loyal and trusting as you are now. And yet later he tried to push me into a pit."

I thought the girl would scream. But it seemed to freeze on her lips as she shrunk away from Alicia and clung close to Landren's arm. "If it's a joke, I don't like it at all," she said faintly.

"I was his wife," Alicia insisted. "His right name is Septimus Cedar."

Landren's expression had been amusingly tolerant. Now it became a bit impatient. "I'm like Eve," he said. "If this is a joke, it doesn't wash down a bit."

His arm went around the girl. "Let's go home, Leonard." She took his arm and urged him toward the door.

But Landren didn't retreat. "If there's music," he said with a shrug to Alicia, "let's face it. Do you really think I'm someone else?"

"I *know* you were my husband, Septimus Cedar."

"That's perfectly wild!" Eve protested.

"Please sit down, won't you?" Alicia urged her gently. "You must hear what I have to say."

"Do, Eve," Landren, himself, seconded.

"I prefer to stand," the girl said.

She was perfectly sure, I saw, that Landren was impeccable.

BEGINNING her story, Alicia spoke directly to Eve in a tone infinitely gentle and compassionate. "You will know I tell the truth," she said, "because of what it costs me. When I am through, a man who has honored me with an offer of his name will forever despise me. I have told him only part of the truth. When he hears the rest of it, he will know me for a cheat, and hate me."

Beyond doubt she was referring to John Temple. I saw a blank astonishment grow now on Temple's face. Beyond any doubt he had been asking Alicia to marry him all of these past three years. Now, embodied in her warning to Eve, she was telling him why she had refused.

"When Septimus Cedar met and married me," Alicia said, "I was a trapeze performer in an Australian circus, by summer. Winters I had bit parts in a stock company. Soon after he married me, Mr. Cedar put me up at a Honolulu hotel and went away on business. He was scouting for new pearl beds, he said.

"At a bamboo bungalow which he kept on an almost deserted island he came upon a fugitive thief. He recognized the man as Guy Affering, a trust officer who once absconded from New York with a large fortune in cash."

Guy Affering! Immediately I remembered the case. The man had absconded, years ago, with more than a million dollars and had never been found.

Eve was still high-chinned and hostile toward Alicia, and Landren was still half tolerant and half impatient. But Alicia had their ears, anyway. Arkles, Temple and I moved closer. To one side, I glimpsed Rokh as he peered from behind the draperies at the hall arch.

"My husband," Alicia said, "accosted the fugitive by his right name. Affering, an old man with a misshapen foot, at first denied the identity. But after a few nights of heavy drinking he admitted he was Affering. What of it? His only crime was larceny, and from here they could not extradite him. In any case the cash was safely buried on the island.

"To get it for himself, my husband took pains to woo the confidence of Affering. He befriended the old cripple, who was in ill health from a succession of fevers and half mad from lonely brooding. He told Affering to make himself at home

at the bungalow. If anyone chanced to stop by he could call himself Hargis, the caretaker."

Landren interrupted. "Do I understand," he inquired without heat, "that when you say your 'husband, Septimus Cedar,' you refer to myself?"

"I do," Alicia said, keeping her gaze on Eve. Eve was the color of chalk. To her Landren whispered: "It's crazy, dear. But let's hear her out."

"Nights of drinking there with Affering," Alicia said, "disclosed to my husband the reasons for the old man's insane brooding. Safely aflight and using a new name, Affering had married a young blond girl at San Diego, California. Forty years his junior, she had married him for his money with the idea of spending it with a chosen lover. Old Affering found that out when she filed suit for divorce and half his estate, on a trumped-up charge. He didn't dare fight the suit because it would expose him, a fugitive, to the scrutiny of the courts. So he ran off, taking all his cash with him, to South America. It was during that period of his career that a street car crushed his foot, maiming him for life.

"Three times later in his wanderings he again married, each time to a young girl. His second was a Chilena at Iquique; his third a Russian in the Slavic colony at Shanghai; his fourth was a Kanaka girl from the island of Maui.

"The Chilena probably played fair with him," Alicia said. "But the old man was jealous of her young friends. He was bitter, in a state of mind to imagine infidelities. His next, the Shanghai Russian, was a tartar. She tried to poison him. Affering found it out and left her for the Kanaka on Maui, where again he imagined infidelities which did not exist. He ended up half crazy with bitterness at my husband's bamboo refuge on the island.

"There, in his drinking bouts with my husband, he constantly heaped imprecations against his four deserted wives. 'I should have throttled them all,' he would rage. 'If I weren't a coward and a cripple, I'd go back and do it now!'"

THE ordeal of this recital was taking a terrific toll from Alicia. She halted it for a moment, during which I tried to picture the mentality of Affering as he rotted amongst the weeds of his bitterness on that island.

"One night in his cups," Alicia said, "he offered to give all of his money to the man who would do it for him. My husband was interested. He led the discussion on. Immediately he saw a way to deceive the old man—he saw a way to make it appear that the four women were murdered when really there was no violence at all. His first idea was to go away and return in a suitable time with faked news accounts telling of four separate homicides.

"Now he bargained with Affering through many nights of drinking. Finally he got the names and addresses of the four women. But Affering was sharp enough to see the news accounts could be faked. So he would not trust them. [The four women must be brought to the island one by one and killed before Affering's eyes. Affering, a coward, would himself have no contact with the crimes. He would merely watch from a distance. Then he would pay the price."

Eve Marland, by now, was gripped with horror. One small white fist was pushed against her lips. Landren stood with his arm around her, keenly attentive. What struck me most forcibly was the revelation that the four wives were not, after all, Cedar's, but Affering's.

"My husband," Alicia resumed, "pretended to agree. One of the approaches to the bamboo bungalow was a path be-

side which was a deep pit. The plot finally hatched was this: as the agent arrived in turn with each wife, he would lead her toward the bungalow along that path. Affering would be watching from the bungalow. A certain signal would signify that he saw the couple coming. Then in each case the agent would topple the victim into the pit."

My throat was dry when I asked: "But surely you, Miss Carterall, didn't agree to lend yourself to any such monstrous deceptions?"

She shot a pleading glance toward John Temple. "I thought I was lending myself only to the saving of four lives."

Temple's hand was on her shoulder. "Of course, Alicia," he said gently.

I could see now why she had refrained from telling him of these horrors before. Though her motives at the time were honest, later knowledge of the facts had shamed her. She bared them now only as a last bitter resort to warn Eve Marland.

"Affering gave my husband four letters, one to each wife. Each letter said he was sick and dying, and for the woman to come. 'They'll come fast enough,' he said bitterly, 'for they each want my money.'

"My husband then went to Honolulu, where I had been all this while. He told me about the plan, but entirely distorted his motive for pretending to comply. He is a very persuasive man, Miss Marland. And I was infatuated with him, as you are now. His method of pretending to comply was this: we would go in turn to San Diego, Iquique, Shanghai and Maui. Without accosting any of them, we would observe each woman; I, who had worked on the stage, would prepare a costume and make-up for each one.

"The motive he gave me for pretending to comply was that if he refused, then Affering would seek another agent. He would entrust those errands of murder to the first beachcomber who came along,

and in the end his offer would be accepted. So why not make him think the crimes had been consummated? What harm would there be in deceiving him? My husband, glib and convincing, made me think it a fine, chivalrous crusade. For pay, Affering would give my husband the cash fortune, which would then be sent anonymously to the New York trust company from which it had been embezzled. Don't you see, every end of justice would be served!"

FOR a moment we were all breathless. Instead of being absurdly fantastic, the thing now was really beginning to seem neatly plausible.

Yet Landren chose to exclaim: "Amazing, my dear young lady! As I understand, the first four wives were Affering's; only the fifth was mine, and she doubled for the victims at each murder!"

His vein of sarcasm was plain enough. Alicia ignored him, faced Eve.

"We did it," she said. "Four times from a distance, the rheumy eyes of Affering saw me pushed into the pit. But a swing had been erected in it, in each case, unbeknownst to Affering. As an ex-trapeze artist, it was easy for me to catch the swing, then to lower myself on a rope to the bottom. From there I crawled through the tunnel to the beach, hiding under the cliff until my husband had a chance to pick me up."

"Did you deceive Affering on all four occasions?" I asked.

"We thought we did, but probably we didn't. Or maybe Affering simply welched on the bargain. Anyway he declined to turn over the money. I was at Nukualofa when it happened. But when my husband returned to me, he did not admit the failure. He told me that he had received the money from Affering and had shipped it anonymously to the rightful owners."

"For what reason would he tell you that?"

"To keep me from writing letters of warning to the four threatened wives. If I did that, I would start a hornet's nest buzzing. Affering would soon have visitors. He would no longer be a private mark for my husband, who still hoped to get the money."

"After a while," Alicia told us, "I began to worry about Affering. He was now just a broken old cripple, sick and dying on a lonely island. I had conspired to deceive him, so now I thought of him and pitied him. I insisted that we take him supplies of food and medicine. When my husband agreed, I mistook his motive for kindness. Actually he merely wanted to stalk that buried fortune once again."

"We went. This time I was in my true character. Rokh did not recognize me as the Nordic blonde, the Iqueque Chilena, the Shanghai Slav or the brown Kanaka he had transported on earlier occasions. Thinking me a fifth wife, he warned me."

AT THAT statement of Alicia's, I could no longer doubt any part of the story. It made Rokh's testimony match perfectly with Alicia's.

"Reaching the island," she said, "we left Rokh on the beach with his boat and climbed to the hill-top bungalow. There we found Affering dead in bed. He had succumbed to fever. Toward the last, however, he apparently had made a desperate effort to gather up his loot and get away."

"How did you gather that?" I asked.

"Because we saw all of the long-buried money right there on the table. Septimus Cedar tried to explain away the lie he had told me about the return of the money. Disgusted, I refused to listen to his protestations. As I left the bungalow he took my arm to guide me—it was dark—and as he argued we moved along that jungle

path toward the cliff. Suddenly I saw the pit. This time there was no swing or rope in it. And I felt my husband's grip tighten on my arm. He intended to kill me so that he could take the money without it being known."

"So you escaped?" Landren asked evenly of Alicia. "Now please let us. This has been rather exhausting, you know."

He directed a weary smile first at Temple, then at Arkles, then at me. We returned it with frigid stares. John Temple's hand was still resting lightly on Alicia's shoulder. It must have told her that the new light she had thrown on the matter made no difference.

Nor was Eve Marland less loyal to the man who called himself Landren. What flashed through my own lawyer's mind was this: there was really nothing on Landren, even if we baited him into admitting he was Cedar. Cedar had murdered no one.

More and more it was clear that all we could hope for was to make Eve Marland see that he was Cedar.

"Please take me home, Leonard," she said now.

And Alicia beseeched her: "Please be convinced. I was his wife. He can't look at me and deny it."

But Landren could—and did.

Then he permitted Eve to draw him toward the door. Alicia followed, still protesting courageously. "Very well," she said. "He is brazen enough to face me. But could he face the four wives of Afferring?"

That challenged them into stopping. "Are you going to pull them out of a hat?" came derisively from Landren.

Alicia said in a breathless rush to Eve: "It's a test he can't face. I dare him to try. I mean I dare him to look at me as I was made up to deceive Afferring."

Eve's eyes were like saucers.

Alicia said: "In a trunk upstairs I have

all four of those costumes. My maid is there to help me make up.

"He's afraid to," she said tensely to Eve. She had, I guessed, some ace in the hole. "He's afraid," she challenged. "There's evidence in those four characters which he cannot face. And he knows it."

Her words fired our imaginations. And to Landren they gave no choice. If he withdrew now he would seem to retreat in poor order from new and vital evidence. "Let's see it through, Eve," he sighed. "And we might as well make ourselves comfortable."

When he had induced Eve to sit down, Alicia Carterall left us. We heard her run up the steps to her room.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Seventh Cedar

IN a remarkably short time Alicia came down made up to represent the first of Afferring's four wives. I was disappointed, for the deception was not particularly effective. The San Diego woman had been described as a blonde, and Alicia had had no time to treat the blackness of her own hair.

She had overcome that drawback partially by concealing her hair under a jaunty yatching cap. She wore white duck trousers and a middy blouse, and was smoking a cigarette. Her lips and cheeks were redder and she had done something to her eyebrows. "It would be fairer if we had moonlight," she said.

When she turned off all the lights except one dim, yellow globe in a far corner, the deception was slightly improved.

Like a manikin Alicia posed before Landren, turning so that he saw each profile. "Her hobby was boating, you remember," she reminded Landren. "It was in this dress we saw her, so we copied it. Isn't that so?"

"You know," Landren said to Eve, "I'm really beginning to believe she's sincere, and that she has me confused with someone else."

"My maid has the next costume ready and I'll be down again quickly," Alicia said. "Be patient, please."

She hurried out and up the stairs. As we waited in the gloom, I spoke in an undertone to Temple. "This is no part of your program?"

"It is not," he said. "And I can't see her object."

A Chilena, a Russian and a Kanaka, I was thinking, would be brunettes. Therefore Alicia, herself a brunette, would be better fitted for those parts. With stage experience and a maid to help her, she could make quick changes.

When Alicia appeared before us as the Chilena, she was much more convincing. Over her head was a crimson mantilla, its fold pushed back just far enough to show her fine, ebony hair. This hair was now center-parted. The ends of the mantilla hung forward over her shoulders. Her dress had a laced bodice and a short, wide skirt, and in this, hands at hips, she whirled like a dervish before Landren.

"It was my scream," she reminded him softly, "which helped most to deceive Affering. You remember how I always screamed when you pushed me into the pit. Like this."

Alicia screamed, ear-splittingly. It was enough to curdle one's blood. If Landren lost color, we couldn't blame him. For so did all of us. Then, in a flash, Alicia was gone.

IN a little while Alicia appeared before us as the Shanghai Russian. This time she looked weirdly wicked. She wore long, jade earrings. The slave bracelets on her wrists were coiled silver serpents and her slim figure was tightly gowned in ankle-length satin. Her painted face

was dappled with round black spots. A feather fan half hid it as she weaved sinuously in the gloom before Landren.

"Do you remember," she challenged, "what a time we had duplicating these!" She shook the twin bracelets before the eyes of Landren. "That Shanghai girl had wheedled them out of Affering. Failing to duplicate them, you posed as a collector and actually bought the originals from the girl. Later, as I struggled in your grasp by the pit, one of them came off and fell on the path. Seen there next day by Affering, it was compellingly convincing."

"Take me away, Leonard!" Eve Marland pleaded. She was clinging as loyally as ever to Landren's arm. "Please!"

"But there's only one more model, I believe," Landren said. "So let's see it through. Would you mind getting done with it quickly, Miss Carterall?"

"I shall get done with it quickly enough," Alicia promised, and left us.

That last between-acts interval was solemn and silent. I myself was anything but confident. Alicia had paraded in three characters without, as far as I could tell, making any impression upon Landren.

At last the fourth and final model appeared before us. This time she was really convincing. Here, as real as life, seemed to be a chocolate-skinned Kanaka. I was amazed that Alicia could have so transformed herself thus swiftly. Nor had she depended much on ornaments or properties of costume. Her dress was a simple house frock. Her head and arms were bare.

Bare and as brown as India! No wonder we stared.

The model posed for a long minute before Landren; then, quite suddenly, the lights came on.

Instantly Landren was on his feet. One single word was shocked from him—"Kalanilu!"

"That is my name," the model said. And the voice was not Alicia's.

Then the truth flashed. Instead of coming down herself, Alicia had sent her maid. And the maid not only looked like the Kanaka bride of Guy Affering, but she was that very girl.

Suddenly Alicia, still dressed as the Shanghai vampire, appeared beside her Kanaka maid. "Septimus Cedar knows her name, of course," she said to Eve, "although I have not mentioned it."

Only for a brief moment did the surprise shatter Landren's defense. But it was long enough. Eve had seen his face in that moment, and heard his one spoken word. He had given himself away.

Expecting to see a mere imitator, sudden sight of the real article had proved too much for him. It had slipped his mask, and I could only marvel at the genius of the thrust. It far outshone any which had been offered by Temple. What a fine foundation had been laid in the deliberate parade of three spurious characters! Then, when she had him smugly off guard, Alicia had bowled him over with the real thing.

LANDREN was trying to right himself with Eve. But Eve was backing away from him. She was disillusioned. That one peep behind the mask had been enough. Instantly she was through forever with Landren. Gazing at him with a growing horror, she took the ring from her finger.

When she held it toward him, he declined to take it. It fell with a tinkle to the floor. When Landren stepped toward her, arms futilely outstretched, his own foot crushed it.

Then Temple's voice boomed decisively. "Rokh, please show Mr. Cedar to the gate. Not merely to the door, Rokh, but to the gate."

Septimus Cedar turned on his heel and left the room. Rokh followed. They went out the front door, and we heard it bang shut behind them. Then, possibly half a minute later, I thought I heard some sort of cry out there. I wasn't sure, though. Those with me were too engrossed to hear anything at all.

The maid had gone upstairs. Eve was crying, while Bud Arkles vainly tried to comfort her. John Temple was speaking earnestly aside with Alicia.

Lighting a cigar, I puffed it thoughtfully. After a while I tried to join Temple and Alicia, but there I found three to be a crowd. So I strolled across the hall to the gunroom. Once more three made a crowd, for I found Eve and Bud seated on a bench, the girl weeping on the boy's shoulder.

There seemed nothing for me to do but pace the hall and chew on another cigar.

Half an hour later I went out on the dark front porch. The sky was overcast, not a star or moon in sight.

It was trying to storm. The atmosphere was depressingly sultry. Occasionally the horizon gave a wink of lightning. In one of them I glimpsed the six cedars. And I thought I saw Rokh engaged in some odd chore to the right of the rightmost cedar. There was only the split-second glimpse of him. It exposed him with a garden spade in the inexplicable act of tossing a shovelful of earth into a newly dug hole.

"Rokh!" I shouted, but he did not answer. Perhaps, I thought, I was mistaken. It was as dark as Egypt again. Yet in a few minutes there came another wink of storm light. This time I was sure I saw Rokh. He was at the same spot, still to the right of the rightmost cedar, and this time I saw him patting down a block of sod with his spade.

When the dark girl—stark horror in her eyes—banded Johnny Connell that cryptic note in the hotel lobby, he never guessed it would be the initial twist that would turn a murder set-up into a—

SUICIDE PACT

by Thomas Walsh

Author of "The Patient in Room 14," etc.



Johnny Connell tried to
tear his hand free.

JOHNNY CONNELL had seen the dark girl once or twice about the hotel, but he had never spoken to her, didn't know her name. She had a lovely mouth, finely curved, and dark eyes above it that were uncertain and anxious in a pale young face. Now she seemed to be coming to him straight across the lobby, smiling with the slightest trembling of

her lips, both hands outstretched to him.

"Jack Ballard," she cried, with the smile wavering desperately. "How nice seeing you! When did you get in?"

Johnny Connell was puzzled. "I'm sorry," he said. "There must—"

She did not turn her head, but her eyes moved quickly to the man at her shoulder, and her palm, gripping closer against

Johnny's pushed a square of paper into his hand. He stopped speaking and in the same instant the girl released him, stepped back, her laugh brittle, forced.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "Of course it's a mistake. You aren't Jack Ballard at all, are you? Do forgive me."

The tall, dark man standing behind her had dead black hair worn long at the back, almost like a mane; his mouth was narrow and wide under high brows arched over heavily lidded black eyes. He did not speak, nor did the girl again, but her strained features kept telling Johnny Connell something. When he dropped his hand to his side with the paper still hidden in it he thought he detected sudden relief in her expression.

"Of course," Johnny Connell said. He bowed; the tall man bowed. The girl smiled brilliantly, took her companion's arm, said, "Sorry," again, and moved away.

Johnny Connell stared after them, puzzled. When they vanished inside the elevator cage he opened his palm, glanced at the paper. It was heavy linen, folded in quarters, still damp from her touch. On the outside was written in a woman's hand: *To Mr. Paul Aberdeen, 12 Folsom Road, North. Won't you take this over at once, Nick?*

Frowning, Johnny Connell turned it over and looked inside. There was more writing on the inner fold but he did not read that. After a moment he put it in his pocket and crossed to the elevator.

JOHNNY left the cage at the ninth floor and turned down the corridor to the room he shared with Nick Mallory. Nick was a blond young man with white teeth and a nice grin; he played the saxophone in the hotel orchestra from nine to one. When Johnny came into the room he was standing before the dresser mirror, tying a black bow around his wing collar.

"How's the little Rock Mountain golf pro?" he asked cheerfully.

"Fine," Johnny Connell said seriously, giving him the note. "I just got this downstairs in the lobby. It must be for you, Romeo. A dark girl gave it to me just now—the one I saw you talking to last night."

The cheerfulness went out of Nick's face; it twisted a little under suddenly sullen eyes. He straightened out the ends of his tie, got into his coat, picked up the note and put it down again. He went halfway to the door and then stopped.

Johnny Connell said quietly: "It can't be as bad as all that. If you want to tell Papa—"

"Why not?" Nick said. His smile was crooked. "It's an old story and you heard it before. Not that there's a hell of a lot to it, Johnny. I knew the girl when she was Diane Aberdeen; she danced in a night club back in New York while I was in the house orchestra. Young love—" He waved his hand, tried to grin. "Soft music and stuff like that. I guess I'd been seeing too many movies. I figured on marrying her when a banker's kid turned up—this Noel French that died on her two months back. You know how it ends, don't you?"

Nick kept smiling broadly. "She gives this millionaire boy the gate; I didn't have any money but what was that? She loved me and she gave up everything for me." After a moment he added tiredly: "Nuts. It wasn't a movie. I woke up one morning and saw it all in the papers. They'd been married in Greenwich. So what?" He laughed with a kind of leaden sound.

Johnny Connell didn't say anything. Nick looked down at him, repeated: "I'm not a sucker. I was once and I learned something from it. I learned to stay clear. She tried to speak to me last night when you saw us but I ducked her. You can forget them, Johnny—any of them. I—"

He stopped; his eyes were suddenly dark and miserable.

"Who's this Aberdeen she wants the note to go to? Her father?"

"I guess," Nick said. "Hazel—her mother—married twice. I met Paul Aberdeen, the first one, Diane's father. He and Hazel played second-class vaudeville houses all their lives. The old lady raised up Diane as a dancer, took her around with them on their trips. She divorced Aberdeen two years ago and married some Spaniard."

Johnny Connell remembered the tall man in the lobby. His eyes grew thoughtful and he moved one hand toward the note. "What are you going to do with that?"

"Nothing," Nick Mallory told him, the darkness coming back into his eyes. "Slip it into an envelope and give it to a bellhop if you want. She could have phoned him."

"Suppose she couldn't?" Johnny said.

"Couldn't?" Nick stared at him. "What's to stop her? Can't you see what it is? This French is dead now and she has all the money she'll ever need. She liked me once and when she sees me here she thinks it'd be nice if we—" He turned with his eyes savage, went over to the dresser, poured out a drink.

Johnny Connell looked doubtful. He said: "Maybe you're wrong. She's just a kid, Nick—she looked scared as hell."

Nick pulled his coat smooth over his shoulders and crossed to the door. He said with it half open: "The old army game. You'll wise up, Johnny. I did."

NICK went out, slamming the door, and in a moment Johnny Connell got up, roamed absently over to the window. A funny guy, Nick—trying to kid himself, trying to be hard, when he wasn't really, underneath. And the girl — She had looked frightened, no matter what Nick

said. Johnny Connell wondered what had scared her.

The buzzer sounded. Johnny Connell crossed the room and opened the door. The tall Spaniard who had been with the girl downstairs bowed in at him from the corridor.

He had a quiet, slightly harsh voice; while he spoke his heavily lidded eyes seemed fixed on Johnny Connell's nose. He said: "Mrs. French is sorry about the mistake. She did not wish to trouble you. The resemblance, unfortunately—" He shrugged and his thin lips drew in without looking much like a smile. His right hand came out, palm up. "You will let me have the note now, please."

Connell said: "I don't understand."

The Spaniard's lips contracted; his hand moved fast. Johnny Connell was surprised at its grip. It fastened on his arm, swung him easily to one side, as it might a child, before he had time to brace himself. The Spaniard went past him into the room.

Johnny left the door open and took three long steps. When he was before the Spaniard again his face was no longer pleasant. He said: "Get out of my room."

The Spaniard looked from under drooping lids at Johnny almost quizzically, without answering. Then he turned away saw the note on the table where Nick Mallory had dropped it. His hand had nearly closed on it when Johnny Connell hit him.

He got to his feet slowly, all the blood in his face gathered beneath the dark bruise just under his jaw. When Johnny Connell said again, "Get out," his body twitched; his chest moved deeply, without sound.

The Spaniard moved unsteadily, like a drunkard, back to the door. He kept watching Johnny Connell, silently, with his insane eyes, until the panel of brown wood shut him off.

When he had gone Johnny Connell

rubbed his knuckles. Why would the girl send him up now to get the note? Ten minutes ago she hadn't wanted him to know anything about it. Staring at the note, Johnny could see her lovely mouth and the terrified look in her eyes. A girl like that, scared—and then this bird—

Johnny Connell swore. He took the note from the table, grabbed a light gray coat from the closet and went out to the hall. In the lobby he stopped just long enough to get directions from the night clerk for finding Folsom Road.

AUGUST was the busy season for Rock Mountain. Outside the resort hotel, village streets that would be deserted in winter were now crowded with groups of vacationists. Guitar music strummed faintly in from the lake over the lazy *slap slap* of oars; far off a girl laughed, and the sound came to Johnny Connell thin, tinkling. It set him thinking about Diane and he was thinking about her as he reached Folsom Road.

There were no street lights but most of the houses were lit, and he stopped his roadster at the sixth one in—a three-story frame residence with a square dark porch facing the road. His ring was answered by a pleasant-looking woman with gray hair and a plump face.

"Mr. Aberdeen?" she said. "I'm afraid he just left. If you'd like to come in and wait I'm sure he'll be back shortly."

She smiled at him again and Johnny Connell went in, followed her brisk feet up to the third landing. There was a small space here barred off by walls of new plaster, with doors on either side. The woman opened one on the left.

"There." She snapped on a wall light in the room, watched him sit down, patted her clean apron anxiously. "Just make yourself comfortable. Mr. Aberdeen always wants his guests brought up. I'm sure he won't be long."

Johnny Connell put his hat on the table and looked around after she left him. It was a sitting room, not large, rather drab. There was a grass rug on the floor, some pieces of worn wicker furniture scattered around, a tall lamp at the farther side that wasn't lit. The wall bulb threw a weak glow over his chair, but left the rest of the room shadowy and vague, save for the dull glitter of a brass smoking stand lying flat on the floor near the farther wall. Just under the edge of the stand there was a woman's shoe.

It made Johnny Connell uneasy, he didn't know why. He got up and took a restless step, staring at the shoe. One shoe. Where— He turned and looked over the rug, walked to one side so that he could see behind a chair. The mate wasn't anyplace. There was a thick reddish stain on the sharp edge of the heel.

Johnny Connell began to feel intensely hot. He wondered what the hell was the matter with him. The quietness of course—nerves. Anybody might have had a nosebleed. Taking the smoking stand with him, he went back to his chair and sat down.

Five minutes went by—ten. Nothing at all happened. His eyes began to ache and he realized suddenly that he had been staring at the door on the far side of the room ever since his cigarette went out. The door was closed; shadows were thick over it. If there was a bathroom inside there, where he could get some water—His throat was parched. Aberdeen shouldn't care if—

He got up quickly and walked over, opened the door. It was dark inside, though not wholly so; he could see pale curtains motionless at a window, the paler white splotch of a bed. There was something on the bed.

Johnny Connell stayed where he was, in the doorway, something inside his stomach cold and hard. The quietness was like

death. The thing on the bed didn't move. Even before he forced himself to go over to it Johnny Connell knew that it would never move.

THE woman had her face down on the coverlet. She had black hair, cropped close, and below it on her neck a thin strand of cord was drawn tight into the puffed flesh. Her feet dangled over the edge of the bed and one shoe was missing.

Her fingers were drawn up in a fist, on a blanket folded at the foot of the bed. Johnny Connell touched it briefly, went back to the sitting room with his face pale and hard. Just inside the door he heard steps on the outer stairs. While he stood there the corridor door opened, and a small man in white pants and a blue coat came in.

The small man stopped. Johnny Connell said: "I was asked to bring this note to you. Your daughter—" He had to clear his throat. "You're Mr. Aberdeen?"

The small man came into the light. He blinked quickly, furrowing the flesh of his forehead into ridges, read the note and put it in his pocket, his head bent slightly to one side so that he still looked up at Johnny Connell. Then he turned, his eyes darting to the bedroom door, and Johnny, turning too, saw that he had left it open behind him.

The small man's face blurred and ran together. Words, tears, tumbled out brokenly; his hands came up and pawed. "I didn't— Before God— It's a plant, kid. I came home and she was there, like you saw her. God's truth." He stuttered, gasped; his lips wobbled.

Connell said: "Who killed her?"

Aberdeen came close, his eyes moving anxiously up and down over the other's face. "I'm telling you, kid—God's truth. I came home from the movies and there she is, where you see her. The first thing I thought was to get a train out of here.

Then they'd find her tomorrow, and if I left like that everyone would think I killed her. I thought then I could leave her on a road somewhere so they wouldn't know where it happened."

Johnny Connell watched him. He asked after a moment: "Don't you even know her? She couldn't get in here without being seen. Your landlady would have—"

"No, no." His words beat out feebly. "I asked Mrs. Harris did anybody come. She didn't know because she'd been over at her mother's and just got back. She just made the place over into apartments. There's no bells yet for the different ones so she leaves the porch door open all the time. Tonight she's out and so am I. Anybody could've come up. Who'd have seen them?"

"Then you don't know who she is?"

Aberdeen hesitated, shifting his eyes. After a silence he admitted: "I know her. Her name's Esther Greenberg. She—she was a nurse." He raised his hands, caught Johnny Connell's lapels. "You go see Diane. Tell her Miss Greenberg's dead—the nurse that took care of Noel. Maybe she'll—"

Johnny Connell stared at him, at the bedroom door, then took his hat from the table. "I'll see Diane," he said. "Don't go away."

THE clerk at the hotel gave him the number of Mrs. French's suite, and he went up in the elevator and rang twice at the door of 608 before it drew back. In the opening a negligee woman with a face shiny from cold cream stared at him.

The woman said, "Well?"

Over her shoulder Johnny Connell saw Diane. "It's all right, mother," the girl said, slipping before her. "Don't bother. I—"

Then the Spaniard was there too, just behind her, gripping her wrist. He said: "Don't go out."

Diane's mother looked at Johnny Connell sharply. "The gentleman can come in. That is, if it's—"

"No." Diane tried to edge out. "I want to see him alone. It's important, mother. It's about Nick." Her small wrist twisted in the Spaniard's hold, and Johnny Connell breathed hard. He took half a step forward in the same instant that Diane got her arm free and came out to him, closing the door on her mother's protesting voice.

"Nick couldn't bring the note," he said. "He was due on the floor at nine. I took it over."

"Oh." She smiled faintly. "I thought Nick—but it doesn't matter awfully. It was nice of you."

It took a long time for more words to come. He asked finally: "Did you—do you know a girl named Esther Greenberg?"

Her eyes searched his, frowning.

Johnny Connell tried to dress it up and couldn't. There didn't seem any way. He said at last, quietly: "Esther Greenberg's dead. She—died tonight in your father's apartment."

Her whole body was shaking. Johnny Connell gripped her elbows gently and said: "It's all right, Diane. Don't worry about it. Nobody knows but your father."

"Knows?" She rubbed one side of her face dazedly. "But you don't understand. You—"

"I know I don't," Johnny Connell said. "I came back to find out. I want to help you, Diane."

Three people got off the elevator in the center of the corridor, walked up toward them and entered a room ten feet away. When they had closed the door Johnny Connell said: "Don't be afraid. I told you I want to help you, Diane. Just tell me what it's all about. Why did you ask me to bring that note to your father tonight? Couldn't you have gone yourself?"

Her white face smiled desperately. "Yes, of course, I—" She raised her arm and the puffed part of her sleeve dropped back. Against her wrist Johnny Connell saw purplish marks.

She made an aimless little gesture with her hand. "Noel—" she said. "Noel—" Her voice broke. "Noel was killed too."

THE slow whisper died while he stared at her. "Everybody thought it was pneumonia. You see Noel had had that once but he'd recovered. Then last September he went out with Ramon to a party and he came home drunk. The next morning he was sick again.

"I hadn't slept in his room—not for months. We—we hadn't got along. When I wanted to call a doctor this time Ramon wouldn't let me. He said Noel would be all right. And then the next night I went in late; I thought I heard Noel call. He—he had nothing over him but a sheet, and all the windows were open. I got some blankets and put them over him, and while I was fixing the bed I had to touch the sheets." She shuddered; her voice became so low that Johnny Connell could scarcely hear it. "They were wet, soaked through.

"Then Ramon came in. He said it was just a night sweat and it meant that Noel was getting better. But it frightened me, and I called a doctor when I got back to my room. He came up in a little while and I went into Noel's room with him, but someone had changed the sheets then—they were dry. The doctor said Noel was very sick and he had to have nurses all the time; he sent one up that morning, and Miss Greenberg relieved her the next night. I thought that would make everything safe but it didn't. I went in to see Noel again about twelve that night, and the same thing had happened. There weren't any blankets and the bed was soaked just as if someone had poured ice

water over it. Noel was raving; I could hear Ramon and Miss Greenberg talking in the living room downstairs.

"Ramon had some bottles out on the table. I think he was trying to get Miss Greenberg drunk so she wouldn't know anything about it. I made her go upstairs and change the bed. Ramon came with us and when he said it was a night sweat Miss Greenberg looked at him queerly. Then in the morning he told me it must have been an accident and he'd fired her for being careless. He made me give him five hundred dollars for the doctors, he said. But I think he gave it to Miss Greenberg so she wouldn't say anything. Two days later Noel died."

She began to sob quietly. "And then he said if I ever told anyone about it they'd say I planned it to get Noel's money. He said he'd swear that he caught me once soaking the sheets. I'd go to prison, maybe the chair. No one would believe me."

Johnny Connell murmured something from between gray lips; for the first time in his life he wanted to kill a man. The girl went on dully: "I was afraid. The only person I told was father. I've never done anything I wanted, even when I was a child. Mother decided everything; I never thought of questioning her."

Her lovely mouth quivered faintly; she looked past Johnny Connell, over his shoulder. "When I met Nick it was the same. Mother said he was no good, that he had nothing, that I owed her everything and I should do what she wanted to pay her back a little. She talked to me about marrying Noel all the time. I'd be ungrateful if I didn't; he'd be so good to me. And when I told her I wouldn't, that I—I loved Nick, she got sick; she had a bad heart. She said she'd die—"

Her strangled sobs seemed to rise in Johnny Connell's own body. He patted her shoulder, said softly: "But it's all

right now, Diane. What was in the note?"

"Mother told me to cash some bonds Noel left. She said Ramon had information that the company was going to crash, and if I didn't get the money soon they'd be valueless. The bank here arranged it this morning; Ramon was to get the money—a hundred thousand dollars—and put it in a safe-deposit vault. But he didn't do that—I happened to see it in his traveling bag upstairs just before dinner. When I asked him he lied to me; he said he had put it in the vault.

"I was afraid to say anything to him, but I thought if father knew, he could tell me what to do. Father has no phone. I thought Nick would take it over. When I couldn't see him in the lobby I gave the note to you; I'd seen you talking to Nick once and I hoped you'd know who it was for."

Johnny Connell took her arm. "I'm going to get your father. I want you to wait in my room until I get back."

The terror gathered again in her eyes. "But I can't. Ramon—"

"Ramon's through. He won't bother you again. Ever."

TEN minutes later he stopped his roadster in Folsom Road. Without ringing for the landlady he pushed back the unlocked porch door—that part of Aberdeen's story was apparently true—went past it into the vestibule and up the stairs.

The little man relaxed nervously, mopping his face, when he saw who it was. Johnny Connell closed the door to the hall and said: "I've seen Diane; she told me what happened to her husband. She said you knew too."

Aberdeen's tone was cautious. "I knew, sure. That's why Ramon tried to frame me, d'you see? He was afraid I'd talk and he wanted to get something on me so I couldn't."

Johnny Connell frowned. "It's not clear yet. Why should Esther Greenberg come

here? You had nothing to do with her."

"I'm telling you," Aberdeen said. "If I open my mouth now about young French there's this to pin on me. Say this nurse knew about how he died and was blackmailing Ramon. He gets my address off a letter I write to Diane, and then sends Esther Greenberg a note to meet him here at eight o'clock. I just found it in her bag."

Aberdeen moved his shoulders. The landlady's rooms are in the back, and he knew she wouldn't see him if he didn't ring the bell. He warns the girl not to ring the bell, but just to come up."

It began to fit in Johnny Connell's head. "If this nurse was blackmailing him, he wanted to meet her here to pay her off. She had a stiff price, Aberdeen—a hundred thousand dollars."

"A hun—" The little man scuttled around the table, his mouth twisting. "What are you talking about? Where would he get that kind of money?"

Johnny Connell told him. When he had finished Aberdeen said, his voice shaking: "He's robbing my girl! I knew it. That's why—" He gripped Johnny Connell's wrist feverishly.

"You see it, don't you? My girl and young French weren't getting along, and this rat sees two million dollars slipping out from under his hand. So he kills young French, and in a smart enough way so no one suspects. Only this nurse knew, and she bled him. Today she probably wanted the money all in a lump and he gets it for her; then he must have figured she'd want more all the time, and there's no sense in giving her this much. So he kills her and pins it on me." He stopped, breathing very fast, crossed the room, and vanished inside a closet. When he came back he had a revolver in his right hand, with a long, clumsy-looking silencer attachment on the barrel.

Aberdeen snarled, trembling: "He can't

get away with this. Not on Diane, nor on me."

Johnny Connell's hand stopped him. "Wait a minute. You can't—"

"I can't?" Aberdeen said. He stepped away and the butt of the gun came up like a flicker of gray light. Even as he threw his hand out Johnny Connell felt it strike his head, whirl him down endlessly through darkness and a dreadful quiet.

HE CAME to on the grass rug, in darkness, with a dull wave of torture beating in the back of his head. The wall light above him had been extinguished, and the door to the corridor was closed. After a minute he pushed himself up to wobbly legs, groped for the wall switch and found it. It was ten minutes to one by his watch.

In his room at the hotel Diane was sitting in the leather chair, where he had left her. Her face whitened when she saw him and she came instantly to her feet.

Diana moved to him with a choked sound.

"You're hurt," she breathed. "Did father—"

The door in the outer room closed. Under her arm Johnny Connell saw Nick cross to the table, his cheeks hollowed out by a tuneless whistle. He stopped suddenly as he reached it, staring at her, his eyes going once to Johnny Connell and then back. She said, "Hello, Nick," in a voice that wasn't quite steady.

Nick's face flushed; he inclined his head faintly. When no one spoke again he didn't seem to know what to do with his hands; he put them in his pocket, took them out again, said, "Hello," without looking at her. His mouth corners twitched a little in a face he tried to keep composed.

Johnny Connell couldn't think of anything to say. He sat where he was, staring at Nick, until the girl turned to him.

"I think I'll go now. You've been awfully kind but mother may be worrying. It's very late."

"That's all right," Johnny Connell said. His throat was dry. "Just wait a few minutes more, Diane. Out there. I want Nick to help me clean up."

She hesitated. "If you think it's—"

Johnny Connell nodded. "I do. It's very important. I won't keep you long."

She went out without looking at Nick and sat down near the door. Nick came in at his nod, and when he had closed the door behind him Johnny Connell said: "She's in trouble. Her husband was killed. The nurse that took care of him tried to blackmail the Spaniard, and she was strangled tonight in Aberdeen's place. She's still there."

Nick said, "What!" very loud, the word bursting from him.

"Take it easy. Her father told me Ramon killed this nurse. According to him, he sent her a note to meet him at Aberdeen's place while Aberdeen was out. But there's no way of checking his story—maybe Aberdeen's lying and killed her himself. I don't know. I was over there just now and he laid me out with the butt of a gun. This Ramon's got Diane frightened; he says he'll swear she killed her husband if she doesn't do what he wants."

Nick's eyes glittered. He said: "I'll tear the louse apart. Where—"

Johnny Connell said: "Don't be a clown. She never loved Noel French; the mother made her marry him. Get out there and talk to her, and stop acting like a kid that's been stood in a corner."

He went out first. Diane got up, her young face strained and desperate, trying to smile. "I think I'd better go. You've—"

Johnny Connell said gravely: "I'm going to ask you something very important. You said Ramon was with you all evening. Did he leave you at any time, even for a half hour, after eight o'clock?"

Her brows wrinkled. "No. I'm quite sure. We had supper together and then went up to our suite. He was there in the room until you came."

Nick came out from behind him and went over to her. She tried to get off the chair but his arms on either side held her down. He said: "You've got to listen to me, Diane."

She said: "No. I don't want to. Please let me—"

They seemed to have forgotten Johnny Connell. He went out, closing the door quietly behind him.

IN THE corridor he turned right, to the stair shaft, and went down three flights. The door of 608 was unlocked, the sitting room within was lit, and the Spaniard and Diane's mother were sitting on a couch just before him. Facing them little Aberdeen was almost lost in the arms of a Morris chair.

Johnny Connell walked across the rug and sat down next to Aberdeen. Ramon's body shifted on the couch, one arm dropping inside his scarlet bathrobe. He said, "Let me, Hazel," his voice purring. The hand came out again with a long, narrow-bladed stiletto balanced unevenly on his fingers. He was halfway to his feet when the woman said sharply: "We don't need that. I can call the manager and have him put out. He can't come here without any reason—"

She reached for the phone, brought it to her. Johnny Connell said: "I came up for a reason. I came up to talk about a girl named Esther Greenberg."

She put the phone back, carefully, on the table, as if it were made of thin glass. "Esther Greenberg?" She repeated the name as if it surprised her. "What happened? What's he talking about?" When nobody answered shrillness crept into her voice. "And where's Diane? She went out with him two hours ago and she hasn't come back since. It's after one."

"She won't come back," Johnny Connell said. "You're never going to bother her again."

"Why you're crazy!" Hazel was screaming, beating a hand on her knee. "Bother her! My own daughter!"

Behind her Ramon's breathing became audible in a sharp sound that halted even the woman's voice. His arms moved and the scarlet bathrobe dropped off them; his head went a little forward, so that he stared at Johnny Connell from under his high brows, and his right arm came up to his breast, slowly, with the knife blade glittering in steel flashes as he flexed his wrist from side to side. Aberdeen said something in a croaking tone, but the woman remained silent, her palms pressed against the back of the couch, one knee, bent on the cushion, supporting her body. This time she did not stop the Spaniard; he came forward with his steps spaced and light. Johnny Connell got free of his chair.

The instant that he waited seemed very long. The thick hate in him tensed his muscles, made breathing difficult. He had his weight forward on his toes, and when Ramon was quite close he shot his body in against the Spaniard's, his right arm swinging up in a vicious arch, his left flung out to the knife. Taking the punch high on the cheek, Ramon went back with it; but he did not lose his balance, and as Johnny Connell lunged after him he stepped in fast, knife hand moving soundlessly, like flame.

Johnny Connell got the wrist with his hand, pivoted, smashed in his right to the Spaniard's stomach. Ramon's breath burst out, his white face contorted; in an instant he was against Johnny Connell's chest, body strained to body, arms bent to arms.

For a moment they were motionless. Johnny Connell tried to tear his right hand free, his lips drawn back with effort, but

the Spaniard held him steady, forced him back step by step with the centered pressure of his arms. Ramon's face smoothed out; he smiled again, but the smile was drawn out, thinned, by the straining of his body.

The knife came closer to Johnny Connell, very slowly, in jerks that moved perhaps an inch at a time. He could not hold it away, not even when the wall was behind him, with his elbow braced outward from it like a lever. He had no longer any feeling in his arms save a dull torment beating high in his shoulders. When he was flat against the wall with his right arm spread eagled on it by Ramon's left, the Spaniard's face raised above him composed and cruel, with no sound but the rapid whistling of his breath.

ACROSS his shoulder, Johnny Connell could see the woman, still kneeling on the couch, her hand against the back, her negligee drawn up by the curve of her body almost over her knees. One foot dangled out of its slipper; on the other leg, just under the knee, a patch of adhesive was whiter than her skin. Johnny Connell stared foolishly at it.

Somehow, little Aberdeen was in the picture, behind Ramon, trying to push him aside, his voice making high, monotonous sound. Ramon did not look at him; he kept smiling at Johnny Connell, the wide harsh mouth drawn in against gold teeth until its edges were lost in the flesh.

Johnny Connell braced his body desperately, tore his right hand from the Spaniard's and swung it up in a blow that had no force. He knew that. It surprised him to see Ramon's stomach cave in as he struck as if a metal bar had smashed it. The Spaniard went down to the floor, his tall body twisting, rolling over, got to his knees with the knife still in his hand and began to crawl forward again, shak-

ing his head. Johnny Connell seemed to hear the first *pop* then.

At the second, Ramon went down flat, sprawled out, his body shuddering a little. He had fallen on his back and his eyes stared up at Aberdeen, at the smoke that trailed thickly from the long barrel of the little man's silencer. His black eyes fixed on that, motionless and unwinking, but not until the knife slid from his hand to the hardwood floor with a metallic tinkle did Johnny Connell realize he was dead.

Pressed back against the couch, Hazel stared at them silently, her crimson mouth extraordinarily vivid and alive in her face. Aberdeen looked down at the dead man with perspiration watering his lean cheeks, the gun in his hand jerking.

When Johnny Connell came out from the wall he turned and spoke to him in a squeaking voice. "I had to, Kid. He'd have killed you—he was crazy. I slugged you back there because I didn't know who you were. When you tried to take the gun off me, I thought he might have sent you." He nodded down at the dead man.

Johnny Connell took the gun away from him. "Go over to your place. Wait there. I'll help you later with Esther Greenberg."

Hazel began to cry. The little man hesitated nervously at the door and Johnny Connell waved the gun at him until he went out. Hazel moaned brokenly: "Oh, my God! But Ramon deserved it. He killed the Greenberg girl because she knew about young French. She wanted money off him and he went over there and killed her. He—"

"He couldn't have killed her," Johnny Connell said. "He was with Diane all night."

"Then who—" She stopped crying; on her flabby face tears dried. "Who—"

"You," Johnny Connell said, in a flat

voice. It grew very quiet; they stared at each other in silence across the dead man. Hazel's face grayed, but she said calmly enough, as if she were arguing with him over something that didn't matter a great deal: "You're insane. Why would I kill her? There's nothing—"

"There's your leg," Johnny Connell told her, pointing the gun at it. "You got behind Esther Greenberg and strangled her, and while you were doing it, she kicked backward and cut your shin. In the excitement you forgot to wipe your blood off her slipper—maybe you didn't even notice you were cut until you got back here. I found her shoe in Aberdeen's apartment with blood on the heel, but until I saw the adhesive on your leg I couldn't understand what it meant. After that it was plain enough: she did what anybody would do who was being choked from behind. Kicked back. The blood puzzled me because I knew that she didn't bleed, but if she didn't, her killer must have."

His tone was tired, unargumentative. Hazel answered him in a tone she tried to make amused, and only made loud and slightly breathless. "You're insane. I cut my leg today on the bathroom door. I—"

"Aberdeen and I can get the Greenberg girl's body away. If they find it on a road tomorrow they'll think she was here on a vacation and somebody picked her up and robbed her. She was blackmailing Ramon and you and probably didn't say anything to outsiders about it. So nobody knows why she really came."

THERE was another silence, longer. She made two attempts to speak before words came out. "What are you going— Of course, this is absurd. You can't tell the police. Just because I cut my leg—"

Johnny Connell rose from the arm of

his chair. "You've forgotten something. They can test the blood on the slipper and find out if it's yours."

"No," she said. "You won't—you can't. I'll tell you why you can't. Because I'm Diane's mother." Close to him, her gray eyes glittering, she repeated: "I'm Diane's mother. And you love that girl—you'd do anything for her. That's the only reason you'd be doing all this, just so she won't be implicated. You're taking a chance on a murder charge yourself so she'll be clear."

Johnny Connell's face was stony; she hesitated, watching it, went on after a moment: "If you charge me with the murder, they'll find out why Esther Greenberg came here; they'll find out how Noel died. And they'll blame Diane—you wouldn't want that." Her clenched fist pounded on his chest. "So you've got to give me a chance. I'll do what I can to help you—I swear that. I'll make Diane marry you, even, if—" She grew breathless and her voice became almost inaudible. She turned away from Johnny Connell's eyes. "Don't look at me that way! Don't!"

Johnny Connell said hoarsely, his throat strained: "We can get rid of Esther Greenberg, but we can't take your husband out of here. So they'll have to find you with him. That's the out—the only out for Diane."

"With him?" She pushed a hand back dazedly through her hair. "I can't see what you mean. What am I going to tell the police?"

"Nothing," Johnny Connell said. She was watching him stupidly. "You can leave a note and say you killed him and yourself because you couldn't stand the pain. Diane said you had a bad heart. The police won't question a suicide pact." His right arm moved and the gun sailed

through the air, bounced on the couch. Her head turned slowly to look at it, stopped there as if she were paralyzed. Johnny Connell said: "There's a bullet left."

She sat down on the couch, her face grotesque, astounded, as if she couldn't understand his words. Standing by the door, with one hand on the knob, he turned once more, as her voice broke hoarsely after him. "If I don't—"

"If you don't," Johnny Connell said, "there's Esther Greenberg's slipper. This way it's better than the chair. You've got an hour."

He returned from Aberdeen's at half past two. In the lobby he put through a phone call to Suite 608, holding the receiver to his ear until the operator told him that there was no answer. He asked her to try again, listened for thirty seconds more, then put the instrument back on its shelf with his gray eyes colourless and dull.

Upstairs, on the ninth floor, Nick opened the door of the room, and behind him Johnny Connell could see Diane sitting by the window, her face lovely and pointed against the night outside, her dark eyes glowing. She looked very happy; she smiled at him briefly, but even while she did her eyes kept following Nick.

Johnny Connell told her that there'd been an accident, that her mother and Ramon. . .

Breathless, with a hand outstretched gropingly to Nick, she ran out of the room, and when he was alone, Johnny Connell grinned stiffly at the floor. In the quietness presently he got up and moved around, but that didn't help any. He still felt tired and as if nothing would ever matter much again.



Kicker Dell whirled. Then Zeph was upon him.

INDIAN TRICK

by
Maxwell Hawkins

Author of "Fair and Murder," etc.

To the hard-looking pair who drove up in the big car that night, Zeph Kingdom was just another hick to be used and gotten rid of. They couldn't have known that in his veins flowed pioneer blood—and that in his head still lurked a few pioneer tricks.

THE last cracker barrel orator, the last sawdust-spitter had gone home. Zeph Kingdom, who ran Kingdom's General Store at Potterstown, was getting ready to close up for the night.

He had just placed his hand on the old-fashioned bolt of the front doors, when a car drew up in front. Zeph bent his long frame slightly, put his face close to the grimy glass and peered out. He could tell by the distance between the headlights and the ruddy glow of the tail-light that it was a big car. Beyond that, he could make out little.

The sound of the car door opening came to his ears. Then a man, moving with rapid decisive steps, emerged from the gloom. He caught sight of Zeph's figure silhouetted against the lights of the store.

"We want some gas! In a hurry!"

Zeph nodded and opened the door. "I reckon I can fix you up."

He walked across the store to the counter. He was tall and gaunt, with a slight

stoop to his shoulders, although only a little past forty. His hair was thinning at the top of his forehead, but over his temples it grew in sandy tufts that gave him an odd appearance. His face, like his body, was long, and solemn. But his slate-gray eyes at times held a shrewd twinkle.

For more than twenty years Zeph Kingdom had run the store. His father had run it before him. And before that, Zeph's grandfather, who had come out from New York State with his Conestoga wagon loaded with a meager stock of merchandise.

A tough customer, that first Kingdom to settle in Potterstown. He set up his store in a log cabin; he traded and fought with the Indians by turn. And although Zeph wasn't conscious of it, some of his doughty ancestor's iron will and resourcefulness had been passed along to him.

When he returned with a flashlight, his midnight customer had stepped inside.

He was young, not more than twenty-five or -six. His dark suit flared at the lapels, was pinched in at the waist; but it covered a tall, broad-shouldered body. His soft hat shielded his eyes, and Zeph could see only the lower part of his face. He had a glimpse of a thick nose with wide nostrils, a mouth that looked almost lipless.

Standing at one side, the customer let Zeph go out the door first. He followed close behind.

"Fill her up," he said. "She's almost dry."

Zeph put the nozzle of the gas hose into the tank at the rear of the big sedan.

"How far to Grider Lake?" the stranger asked.

"Eighteen miles. Two miles beyond the forest ranger's tower."

"Good roads?"

"No," Zeph replied. "Bad."

"What do you mean by that?"

"All dirt. Rough."

"Road marked?"

Zeph laughed briefly. "Mister," he said dryly, "you're in the back country. There's a few signs. If they haven't fallen down."

The stranger nodded slowly. His tight mouth lifted a little at one corner, as he digested this information.

As Zeph swung his flashlight to look at the gauge on his gasoline pump, Zeph got a quick view of the interior of the car. A woman was sitting in the front seat. In the rear was a second man. He had moved to the far side and was talking through the open door to the big fellow who had ordered the gas.

The gauge showed twenty gallons. Zeph stepped to the back of the sedan and, lifting the nozzle of the hose from the tank, flashed his light inside. The tank was full almost to the brim. His sharp ears caught a voice from the far side of the car.

"Hell—it's the only oil!"

A moment later the big stranger reappeared, moved close to Zeph's side while he screwed the tank cap back on. Zeph straightened up.

"I put in twenty gallons," he said.

"That's three-sixty."

His customer's reply was to glide behind Zeph, jam a hard object in the small of his back. "Listen, hick," he said, his voice low and threatening, "you're comin' along—to show us the way!"

ZEPH knew what that hard object against his spine was. He felt, too, that the big man who was pressing it there wouldn't hesitate to use it. And this sudden turn of affairs not only took him by surprise, but gave him a decidedly uncomfortable feeling.

He gulped. "You—you mean, you want me to—to go along to Grider Lake?"

"You got good ears," the man with the gun sneered. "Come on!" He prodded Zeph to the far side of the sedan, where the door was open. "Gimme that flash!"

Zeph held out the light and it was seized from behind. The big man snapped it on, turned the beam inside the sedan. "Get in back, Babe! Make it fast!"

The girl who had been sitting in front didn't say anything. But she crawled over the seat to the back of the car. She was young, with a white face and big frightened eyes. Her blond hair, cut in a long bob, was topped by a hat that tilted at a rakish angle.

"Get in, hick!" the man with the gun ordered. "And if you let out a sound, I'll plug you." Zeph climbed into the seat the girl had vacated. His captor turned to the man in back. "Hurry up, Kicker, and bring the stuff. Don't forget some candles."

The man called Kicker got out the other side of the car and entered the store. He returned presently with his arms loaded with canned goods, which he placed in back. He made half a dozen trips, each time with an armful of supplies. On his last trip he carried a couple of coils of clothesline.

Then Kicker put out the lights, closed the store door, and took his seat directly behind Zeph.

"You make just one funny move," he growled warningly, "and I'll blow the back of your head off!"

The big man, who had been keeping watch over Zeph, slipped behind the wheel. The heavy car started forward with a smooth, powerful purr.

"Which way?"

"Straight ahead for nigh onto a mile."

It was no time to argue, Zeph realized. These two men were dangerous, deadly. The only thing he could do was guide them to Grider Lake—and hope for the best.

He soon discovered that the best threatened to be pretty bad. A few miles out of Potterstown and the big man stopped the car.

"All right, Kicker. Tie him up."

Kicker bound Zeph's hands. He tied his ankles, too, with the clothesline. Not tightly; just so as to hobble him if he tried to run. Then the sedan moved forward again.

Zeph was trying to figure out the situation. The fact that his captors had looted his store of supplies indicated that they planned to stay somewhere in this Grider Lake wilderness for several days, at least. They were hiding out, he was certain now, hiding out from the law. And the thought caused him to wet his lips nervously with the tip of his tongue.

"Think they'll trace us, Jack?" Kicker asked the man at the wheel at one point. "Not a chance!"

"They may identify Bud's body. Figure we might lay out up here."

The big Jack sneered. "Four hundred miles away? Listen, boy, cops ain't that smart. I'm tellin' you this is the spot. If what Bud said was true."

At least he'd learned something, Zeph decided. The girl was Babe, the driver's name was Jack, and the man behind, with the gun trained on the back of his head, was Kicker. Bud, whoever he was, was apparently dead, four hundred miles away. Bud? The name struck a responsive chord in Zeph's memory.

GRIDER LAKE, which covered about three square miles, was on low ground, its shore on two sides merging into the swamps. On the other two sides the land was higher and dry. Here, half a dozen camp cottages had been built at widely spaced intervals. Now however, in late October, they were all closed.

Even though the springs of the big sedan ironed out some of the roughness of the rutted dirt road, it had taken Zeph

and his captors almost an hour to reach the lake. It was a dismal sight the headlights illuminated. Thickets of alders, willows, and in the background funereal pines.

"There's the lake," Zeph said.

Big Jack nodded indifferently. "Listen, hick," he said, "do you know where the Chelman farm is?"

Instantly, Zeph understood why the name Bud had sounded familiarly in his ears in connection with this trip to Grider Lake. "It's about a mile up this shore. Ain't nobody there now, though. Ain't been since old man Chelman died. His boy's in the pen," he added.

"His boy's in hell, fella," Kicker said dryly.

That clinched it for Zeph. The Bud they'd referred to was Bud Chelman. And that accounted for the presence of these two men and their girl in the back country.

"There's no one there," Zeph repeated. "The house's about falling down. Nobody wants to buy it."

"We didn't come up here to buy," Big Jack growled. "Which way do we go to get there?"

"You'll find a road leading off to the right about ten rods or so ahead."

It was a barely discernible route they followed; the wheel tracks were almost erased; dried and matted weeds choked the center.

The girl whined softly and Big Jack cursed her, told her to shut up. She fell silent. They all were silent.

At last the trees and shrubbery began to thin out. Suddenly the road emerged into a large clearing. Directly ahead was the farmhouse.

It was a one-story structure, small, with a peaked roof. The door was closed. But on either side of the door were gaping windows. They were dark now.

"That's it," Zeph said. "That's the

Chelman farmhouse. The property line's right here."

"To hell with the property line," Big Jack snarled. It was plain that the eerie surroundings were putting his nerves on edge.

He drove the sedan almost up to the door before he stopped. When he did, he sat for a moment contemplating the building. The paint was almost gone. Only a few panes of glass were left in the two windows. What had once been a stoop was rotted and leaning at a crazy angle.

Kicker spoke. "What a dump to drive four hundred miles for."

Big Jack grumbled agreement. "Wait here," he muttered.

He got out, walked to the door and tried it. It was fastened, but he pushed against it with his shoulder and it gave readily. He entered. They could see the ray of his flashlight as he went from room to room. In a few minutes he came back to the car.

"It's a hell of a hideout," he snarled. "But we gotta make it do for a few days. Till things cool off. We'll get the hick parked first. Then we can lug the stuff in."

He opened the door alongside Zeph. "Get out!" he ordered.

Zeph hobbled from his seat to the ground. Kicker got out, too, and he and Big Jack took Zeph into the house. It had four rooms. They put him in one of the back rooms, which had once been the kitchen, and Kicker tied the rope tightly about his ankles. Then they stretched him on the dirty floor near the wall.

As they left, he heard Kicker say, "Why bother with him? Let's get him out of the way now."

"Naw," Big Jack growled. "I got an idea."

BEFORE he had been ordered out of the car, Zeph had noticed the clock

on the dash. The hands stood at one-fifteen. There was no moon, but the sky was clear and the stars, brilliant in the autumn sky, gave a cold feeble light. Looking up from the floor now, Zeph could glimpse this chill radiance through the window above him.

He heard his captors moving about in the front of the house. The mumbling of their voices fell upon his ears.

A door closed, and then the footsteps ceased. The low rumble of conversation still continued, punctuated occasionally by a higher voice. The girl.

Zeph tried his bonds. They had been expertly fastened and he soon decided it was a waste of strength to strain against them. So he made himself as comfortable as he could on the hard floor and tried to think things out.

What were these men and their blond girl fleeing from? He guessed it must have been some kind of a robbery. And evidently Bud Chelman had been one of them. But Bud Chelman had been killed. They had planned to hide out up here, and after young Chelman's death they hadn't been able to find it without help. That was why they'd forced Zeph along.

But always the question burned through his brain—what were they going to do with him? The man called Jack had said he had an idea. The way he had said it had been ominous. Zeph had spent all his life in Potterstown and the Grider Lake country. But he knew men, knew human nature. He saw his captors clearly for what they were. Killers!

Gradually the sound of voices diminished. Then it ceased entirely. Zeph figured an hour must have passed before all grew still in the front room.

Another hour passed, he estimated. That would make it a quarter past three. But at this time of year it wouldn't begin to grow light for several hours more.

And then he became aware that a door

was opening. A few seconds later, the ancient, rotten floor-boards gave a faint creak. Was it only his nerves beginning to play tricks on him?

His doubt ended when a low, guarded whisper came to him.

"Where are you?"

It was the yellow-haired girl.

He swallowed quickly. His throat was dry and he didn't want his voice to boom out.

"Here—almost under the window," he said softly.

There was silence then for a long time. Once more the floor creaked faintly, this time close behind him.

"Careful," he whispered. "I'm right in front of you."

Her groping hands found him, passed over his face and shoulders. She leaned close till he could feel her breath on his cheek.

"I'm gonna help you, mister. But for God's sake, you gotta help me, too."

AGAIN Zeph made sure of his voice before he replied. Then he whispered slowly, "I'll do anything I can. But I can't do anything tied up like this."

"I'll bring a knife. But do you know how to get away from here? On foot?"

"I know every inch of this country."

"You'll take me with you."

"Yes."

"I—I gotta get away."

"What's the matter?"

She moved even closer. "Listen, mister. I got mixed up with Jack before I knew what he was. Down in Indiana. Then he wouldn't let me go."

"Why—why not?"

"I know too much."

"What's he going to do then?"

She began to breathe more rapidly. "My God, don't you understand? There was another girl before me. He got tired of her, too. Nobody's ever found out what became of her."

"You—you mean—"

"I mean he killed her!" Her fingers dug into his arm. "But that devil hasn't got me fooled! He doesn't intend to take me away from here. Now do you understand?"

Zeph was aghast. "I reckon I do, miss."

"Shh!" Once more he felt her fingers pressing into his arm.

They waited in silence, silence heavy with menace of an unseen peril. He could feel her hand trembling. He'd heard nothing, but evidently her ears had caught some warning sound. For a long time they waited in the ghastly blackness. Nothing happened.

"I—I must have been mistaken," she whispered nervously. "They were both asleep when I left." She paused a moment, then went on, "You're safe—for a little while. They think if things get hot and they have to make a getaway through the woods, they'll force you to guide them. Do you see?"

"Yes."

"But you'll never leave them alive!"

"Who—who are they!" Zeph asked.

"My God, don't you know? Jack Killifer and Kicker Dell."

And in that second Zeph's fears for his life crystalized into dead certainty. Jack Killifer, wholesale murderer, the bandit who always fired on sight. Jack Killifer, wanted in a dozen states, hunted by hundreds of law officers.

"We'd better hurry, miss," Zeph whispered. "Get that knife."

"I wanted to be sure—sure you wouldn't leave me," she said. "I'll—"

She got no further. A dazzling white beam stabbed through the darkness. Like a spotlight picking out the principals on a stage, its white circle revealed the kneeling girl, the man stretched upon the dirty floor.

"You double-crossing hellcat!"

Killifer's voice choked with rage. He strode across the room, seized the girl by her hair and jerked her to her feet. Then he began to shake her.

"Jack! J-Jack! Don't—don't!" she screamed, her voice rattling in her throat.

Suddenly he ceased to shake her. "Going to let him go, were you!" he said more calmly. But his calmness seemed even more threatening than his anger.

"No! Honest, I wasn't, Jack!" She was crying now. "I felt sorry for him! I only came in to—to see if he wanted a drink."

"You're lying!"

The words came through set teeth. Again he grabbed her shoulder. He shoved her violently before him into the other room. The door was slammed.

An instant later from beyond that closed portal, her voice rang out in a shrill, agonized shriek of terror. As suddenly as it had broken out, it stopped.

There was a moment of ghastly silence, followed by a dull thud.

A FEW minutes later, the door was opened again. From his place on the floor, Zeph could see that the other room was lighted, and he recalled that Big Jack had told Kicker to bring candles from the store.

Zeph moved onto his side so he could see better. In the orange rectangle of the door, a towering black figure was outlined for a moment. Then Jack Killifer, flashlight in hand, strode up to the man on the floor. He rolled Zeph over on his face and examined the clothesline bonds on his wrists, then his ankles. Apparently satisfied, he straightened up.

"Now maybe I can get some sleep," he growled and strode from the room.

Zeph tried to picture what had happened behind that closed door only a few

minutes before. With a shudder, he came to the conclusion that Killifer in his blind rage had strangled the girl with the yellow hair. That shriek of terror still echoed in Zeph's ears.

The girl had told him that he was in no immediate danger, because these two killers hoped to use him as a guide if it should become necessary to take to the woods. But he couldn't count on that.

And he realized also that there was a slim chance that the girl with the yellow hair had not been killed yet. If she was still alive, something had to be done to save her. He pressed his teeth together until his jaws ached. His utter helplessness was agonizing.

He had to get rid of his bonds, he told himself over and over. And he lay there on the floor, his mind groping frantically for some possible means of accomplishing this.

By pushing with his bound hands, he finally managed to jerk up to a sitting position. That was a help. He could now look out the window with its broken panes. Not more than a third of the glass was left.

Gradually a thoughtful smile crossed his long face. One eyebrow lifted almost imperceptibly; he nodded slowly as if to confirm the idea that had flashed into his head.

Inch by inch, he wriggled to the wall, to the window. By stretching, he was just able to reach the sill. He hooked his chin over it. He pulled himself slowly up, got his forehead onto the sill and gave a quick push. He was on his feet.

Leaning forward, he examined the window as well as he could in the dim light. Then, by rocking from heel to toe, he moved across the short distance and backed up to the broken panes. He bent backward, shoved out his bound wrists as far as possible. Finally, he found what

he needed—a splinter of glass that still stuck in the frame.

Slowly and painfully, he began to saw the rope against it. He stopped often to listen. But no sound came from the front room. He cut himself again and again; he could feel the warm blood on his palms.

At last Zeph detected that the soft rope was yielding. A moment later, he had freed his hands. Swiftly he bent over and removed the bonds from his ankles. He stretched his cramped limbs to restore circulation, wiped the blood away with his handkerchief.

ON tiptoe, Zeph crossed the kitchen to the door leading to the front room. He placed his ear close to the panel and listened. From beyond came a faint snoring mingled with heavy breathing. Zeph smiled to himself. His captors, exhausted from their long drive, were sleeping.

It would be easy now for him to make his escape, he realized. Yet he gave that scarcely a passing thought. It was not in his nature to retreat when he had a chance to capture the enemy.

And there was the girl. Perhaps she was already beyond any help, but until he was certain of her death, he meant to use every means in his power to save her.

He recrossed the kitchen, slowly opened the back door. Outside, he paused to look around for a few seconds. It was growing lighter. He'd have to work fast.

Circling the house at some distance, he reached the big sedan, parked at the front. Carefully, he raised the hood that covered the powerful engine. In the deep shadow which enveloped it, he could see nothing; but his groping fingers found a wire and he gave it a jerk. One by one he removed half a dozen sections of the ignition cable. Then he lowered the hood into place again.

Retracing his steps, Zeph passed the

rear of the tumble-down farmhouse, kept going. From time to time, he hurled one of the pieces of wire into the underbrush. Temporarily, at least, he had blocked any swift dash for freedom by automobile.

As soon as he had put a considerable distance between himself and the house, Zeph increased his pace. He headed down the narrow, weed-choked lane by which they had arrived a few hours earlier. Half a mile down he angled off from the roadway into the underbrush.

A little farther and the trees and ground growth thinned out into a small, rocky clearing.

Zeph smiled grimly. He hadn't forgotten the lay of the land around Grider Lake.

Briskly he set to work. The light was increasing rapidly as he set about gathering a pile of dried branches. When he had enough, he stooped low and presently was fanning a tiny blaze into life. He added fuel until he had a sizable fire, then made his way into the surrounding thickets and returned with an armful of green twigs. These he added to the flames.

As the fire swiftly turned into a heavy smudge, he stood watching it for a few moments. He nodded, an expression of satisfaction on his lean face, as the smoke climbed upward in the still air.

From his pocket, he took out his handkerchief, stained with blood from his lacerated wrists, which he fastened to a sapling near the smoky fire. Something else went with the handkerchief, a little later. And then he glided from the clearing back into the woods and headed toward the farmhouse where Killifer and Dell were sleeping.

Concealed behind a thick clump of underbrush, Zeph looked across the open field toward the dilapidated structure. It was daylight now and he could see the place plainly. There were no signs of

life about it as yet. The killers must still be sleeping.

ZEPH squatted on his heels. He was ready to watch and wait with the patience of the Indians who had once roamed this timbered wilderness. His first impulse on slipping his bonds had been to go for help.

But if he went for help, there was the possibility that either Killifer or Dell might wake up, go into the kitchen, discover he had escaped. In that case, Zeph figured, they'd lose no time making a getaway.

When they found their car had been put out of commission, they'd probably take to the woods on foot. Zeph wasn't enough of a woodsman to follow a trail of that kind. Hardly anybody could. If Jack Killifer and Kicker Dell were to be captured and their murderous careers brought to an end, he couldn't let them out of his sight.

That was why Zeph squatted there in the underbrush; that was why he frequently turned and gazed with thoughtful eyes back toward the spot where he had built the fire.

The sun climbed higher. Still there was no sign of life in the crumbling building across the clearing. The smoke from his fire no longer mounted toward the sky, and Zeph estimated that he had been waiting there in the brush for a couple of hours.

He was about to shift his position and relieve his cramped muscles, when a sudden shrill cry broke upon the morning air. At the same instant, a figure burst from the front door of the farmhouse. It was the yellow-haired girl.

She stumbled over the stoop, started running across the open field toward the woods. And the huge Killifer was close behind her. Then she tripped, sprawled forward with arms flung wide. Instantly,

Killifer was upon her. He yanked her upright. She screamed, a frenzied blood-chilling sound, filled with stark fear.

"Jack! Don't kill me! I didn't help him get away! For God's sake, Jack—"

Killifer's fist cut off her frantic pleas. It caught her on the side of her head and again she went tumbling into the dirt and stubble of the field, a pitiful crumpled heap on the brown ground. Zeph started forward, his eyes blazing with rage. But suddenly he halted, glided swiftly behind a concealing tree trunk.

Kicker Dell, pistol in hand, had appeared from the house and was standing on the stoop. He ran toward Killifer, who was lifting the limp form of the yellow-haired Babe.

"We'd better get the hell out of here!" Kicker cried.

"Yeah!"

"How about her?"

"We'll take her along," Killifer growled. "I ain't done with her yet. You get our stuff together, and I'll get the bus started!"

Kicker Dell nodded, turned and hurried back towards the farmhouse. Killifer, carrying the unconscious girl, made for the sedan.

A grim smile twisted Zeph's mouth; with clenched hands, he backed into the woods until he was sure he could not be seen. Then he slipped through the brush as fast as he could go. He circled the clearing till he was at the rear of the house.

Casting caution aside, he dashed to the back door. Noiselessly, he stepped into the kitchen. The door to the front room was open and he saw Kicker Dell, bending over a suitcase which he was closing. His gun lay on the floor beside him.

Slowly and silently, Zeph eased forward to the doorway, into the front room. And as he stepped across the sill, the ancient floorboards creaked.

KICKER DELL straightened up and whirled in a single movement. And then Zeph was upon him. A tangled mass of arms and legs, they crashed to the floor. Over and over the two men rolled.

Kicker's hand found Zeph's face, the fingers clutched for his eyes. But only for a brief moment. Zeph twisted sideways, brought his knee up and sent the cursing, panting Kicker hurtling from him. Outside a car door slammed.

Zeph scrambled to his feet. Kicker was only on his knees, when Zeph pounced upon him again. The tall man's arms shot around Kicker's body beneath the armpits, and before the killer realized what was happening, he was pulled upright.

As Killifer, a gun in each hand, burst through the doorway, Zeph had drawn Kicker close to him. Killifer's guns came up, but he hesitated. His pal was an unwilling and cursing shield between those ugly weapons and their target.

The big killer's face turned livid with rage. His eyes became shot with blood and the nostrils of his thick nose quivered. Zeph Kingdom knew then that he was looking into the face of a man gone mad with lust for blood.

Killifer's hands moved ever so slightly. There was a deafening roar. Both guns vomited forth their lethal slugs. The impact sent Zeph and his human shield staggering backwards, then to the floor.

Without waiting to see the effect of his shots, Killifer leaped out the doorway into the farmyard.

Vaguely, Zeph was conscious of shouts. And as his head cleared, he realized that somebody was shooting—a lot of people must be shooting. It sounded like a battle.

He dragged himself from beneath the limp figure he had been pressing to him even as he fell. In a daze he stood up, stared at his hands. They were red, a hideous bloody red. He looked down. In

Kicker Dell's stomach was a great gaping hole.

Zeph swayed dizzily. He ran the back of his hand across his face and it left a gory streak. He took a step and almost collapsed. And then he knew that one of the slugs that ripped into the body of Kicker Dell had passed on through into his own groin.

With an effort, Zeph reached the doorway. There he paused, supporting himself against the frame. He looked out into the farmyard. Fifty feet away was a still figure stretched upon the ground, the lifeless fingers clutching a pair of guns. Several men were standing over him. They stared at Zeph for a moment. One of them ran toward him, and Zeph recognized Ed Colvin, the sheriff.

"Is he dead?" Zeph asked.

The sheriff nodded. "We blew him to hell! He wouldn't stop!"

Zeph noticed with a faint smile that one of the men was wearing the uniform of a forest ranger. "There's a girl in the car," Zeph said. "You'd better see how she is."

He limped out into the farmyard. The forest ranger and one of the other men hurried to him and took his arm. Ed Colvin ran to the sedan and jerked the door open.

"You got my note, I see—the one I left in the bloody handkerchief," Zeph

said to the ranger. "I thought you would, Ben."

Ben nodded. "The first thing I saw this morning was a lot of smoke over here near the lake. I didn't lose any time investigating."

"I counted on that," Zeph said. "But there was a chance you wouldn't see the handkerchief."

"Not me," Ben answered. "And when I read what you'd written—that Killifer and Dell were hiding here and you were standing watch on 'em—I phoned the sheriff from the tower. He brought his gang."

"Just in time," Zeph murmured.

The sheriff came up. "The girl's O. K."

"Listen, Zeph," Ben asked suddenly, "what the dickens made you think of building that smudge?"

"You mean my—smoke signal?" Zeph asked with a funny sort of smile.

"Sure."

"I reckon you'll have to give old Grandpa Kingdom credit for that."

The sheriff looked puzzled. "Why Zeph, your grandpa's been dead thirty years."

"Yep. But when I was a kid he used to tell me about the Indians a lot," Zeph said softly. "So I guess I just naturally thought of an Indian trick, when I needed one."

GUN ANGLES

OUR APOLOGIES!

We had all ready for you a sheaf of red-hot dope on certain much-disputed points regarding guns and their use, sent us by two of our authors who know what they're talking about. But when the issue went to press, so crammed-full was it of stories that there was no room for GUN ANGLES! We were confident that every one of the seven yarns in this issue was a knockout, and felt that you'd rather have the stories than the department. So we left it out—not for good, but until the next issue. Watch for it then—it's mighty interesting stuff.—THE EDITOR.

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G. F. Pegram, Texas, clears \$316 in his first 5 days in this business. J. C. May, Connecticut, cleared \$262.35 in 9 days. B. Foyer, Calif., makes \$4,920 in 3 months' time. C. W. Ferrell, Ohio, writes: "My earnings have run well above \$1,000 in a month's time"—he has made over 1,000 sales, paying him as high as \$5 to \$80 profit each sale. J. Clarke Baker, Connecticut, sells 13 firms in 3 days' time, netting \$151.71 clear profit—over \$50 a day profit. Writes that 9 of these 13 firms are already using second or third repeat refill orders. And so on. These men had never sold this item before they came with us! How could they enter a field totally new to them and earn such remarkable sums in these desperate times? Read the answer in this announcement. Read about a new business that does away with the need for high pressure selling. A rich field that is creating new money-making frontiers for wide-awake men. Those who enter now will pioneer—to them will go the choicest opportunities.

FOUR \$5 SALES DAILY PAY \$280 WEEKLY

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EXCEPTIONAL CASH SAVINGS FOR CONCERNS THROUGHOUT THE U. S.
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**\$4,707 RETURNS
For One Kansas Store
in Three Months**

Banders Highway of Kansas in 3 months \$4,707 and shows returns of \$4,000.00 between April 5th and June 28th! Bowser Lumber and Feed Co., West Virginia, returns \$15,000.00; report returns well over \$1,900.00! Fox and Coal Co., Wisconsin, returns \$3,504.00! Baltimore Sporting Goods Store invests \$45, returns \$1,600.00! Follom & Son, Indiana, in 45 days turned \$15 installation into \$2,500.00 cash.

With these and scores of similar results to display, our representatives interest business men from the very smallest to the very largest. No one can dispute the proof in the photo-copies of actual letters which our men show.

**NO HIGH PRESSURE—
SIMPLY INSTALL—
LET IT SELL ITSELF**

Here is a business offering an invention so successful that we make it sell itself. Our representatives simply tell what they offer, show proof of success in every line of business and every section of the country. Then install this specialty without a dollar down. It starts working at once, producing a cash return that can be counted like the other cash register money. The customer sees with his own eyes a big, immediate profit on his personal investment. Usually he has the investment, and his profit besides, before the representative returns. The representative calls back, collects his money. OUT OF EVERY \$10 BUSINESS THE REPRESENTATIVE DOES, NEARLY \$40 IS HIS OWN PROFIT! THE SMALLEST HE MAKES IS \$5 ON A \$7.50 SALE! Our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They are getting the attention of the largest concerns in the country, and selling to the smaller businesses by the thousands. You can get exclusive rights. Business is GOOD. In this line, in small towns or big cities alike! It's on the boom now. Get it while the business is young!

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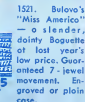
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